JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

This electronic version was created with the approval of the *Jump Cut* editor. It was generated from Web pages and thus some of the formatting is a bit awkward.

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Warning

Some of the films analyzed in this *Jump Cut* issue are beyond the scope of the MPAA rating system, but all the films played at U.S. theaters and in U.S. households at one time or another. Please note that the illustrations for some essays contain sexually oriented adult material intended for individuals 18 years of age or older and of legal age to view sexually explicit material as determined by the local and national laws of the region in which you reside. If you are not yet 18, if adult material offends you, or if you are accessing this PDF from any country or locale where adult material is specifically prohibited by law, please do not continue reading.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Current issue

No. 61, fall 2022

The first word: another playlist The editor looks at the TOC.

by Julia Lesage

Revisiting Marxism and media studies

Introduction. For a Marxist critique of media in the contemporary conjuncture

by Michael Litwack, Beth Capper, and Christopher Robé

The special section editors map the terrain of contemporary Marxist film and media studies and introduce the collection of essays that comprise the dossier.

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Patricio Guzmán:

lessons from The Battle of Chile (1975-79)

by Salomé Aguilera Skiversky

It's been almost 50 years since the devastating coup that ended Chile's "democratic road to socialism." This experiment in film criticism aims to reenliven a classic socialist work about that historical experience for our now-times.

Grounded abstractions: an interview with Conor McNally

by Robert Jackson

This conversation with Métis filmmaker Conor McNally addresses the aesthetic and political insights about Indigenous resistance and settler colonial dispossession emanating from McNally's film *ôtênaw*.

Contemporary television and racial capitalism in place

by Curtis Marez

This essay analyzes the interrelationships between the real and fictional locations of contemporary TV show sand considers how their producers have profited from the history and ongoing reality of racial capitalism where the shows were shot.

Rompiendo puertas/Break and Enter (1971)

Residential autonomy: economies of dispossession and their undoing

by Morgan Adamson

Taking housing as a site of exploration for contemporary media studies, this essay explores how media participate in economies of dispossession but can also build toward their undoing through an examination of

Newsreel's Rompiendo puertas/Break and Enter (1971).

"I am a statistic."

Engineering counterinsurgency against the Welfare Rights Movement

by Yvonne Bramble

Mapping the confrontation between the National Welfare Rights Organization and the development of computer-based fraud auditing systems aimed at

criminalizing working-class women, this article tracks how the state of California appealed to computation's alleged transparency in order to dismantle welfare programs in the late 1960s and 70s.

Disruptive nationalisms:

aesthetics, markets, and the anti-audience of Black media

by Richard Purcell

This essay revisits Long Seventies discussions about the Black Aesthetic in order to argue that Black Radical thinkers were not only engaged in fraught political and theoretical conversations about aesthetics but also undermining the unique commodity form that mass media creates: audiences.

On Pose. "Give us our bread and our roses":

a materialist trans feminist approach to media criticism

by Nicole Morse

By analyzing the television series *Pose* as a commentary on the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, this essay explores the long history of trans cultural production being read (incorrectly) as antagonistic to Marxist theory and argues that formal analysis reveals how trans cultural production can effectively interrogate how subcultures use parody and performance to critique dominant values.

What ever happened to Marxist film theory?

by Matthew Ellis

Review of Mike Wayne, *Marxism Goes to the Movies*; and Anna Kornbluh, *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club*.

Two recent books seek to reintroduce Marxist theory into the undergraduate film studies classroom. Both books pose pedagogical questions not merely for the future of a materialist film studies, but also for how one can account for the legacy of 1970s film theory in the present.

Settler infrastructuralism

by Jordan Kinder

Review of Rafico Ruiz, Slow Disturbance: Infrastructural Mediation on the Settler Colonial Resource Frontier."

A critical review essay of Rafico Ruiz's latest book with particular consideration of its contributions to new directions in materialist media studies.

Poetry from Endless futures

by Nataleah Hunter-Young

Review of Kara Keeling, Queer Times, Black Futures.

In *QTBF*, Keeling sources a way to harness the uncertainty—the queerness—in the future of finance capitalism, exploring Afrofuturist and Black queer media arts for instances of the impossible, errant, opaque, utopic and dystopic that exist in every now.

Latin American feminist film and visual art collectives

Latin American feminist film and visual art collectives

by Lorena Cervera, Sonia Kerfa and Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto

This Special Section revisits the history of the visual arts in Latin America in the light of the commitment of feminist artists' collectives in their ceaseless and inventive struggle to free themselves from the patriarchal yoke and for equality.

Cocina de imágenes, Primera Muestra de Cine y Video Realizado por Mujeres Latinas y Caribeñas (1987): a pioneer event for tasting the recipes of Latin American women's filmmaking during the 1970s and 1980s.

by Elena Oroz

Cocina de imágenes. Primera Muestra de Cine y Video Realizado por Mujeres Latinas y Caribeñas (Mexico City, 1987) was a pioneering event in the consolidation of cinema made by women in Latin America. This article contextualizes the exhibition's origins and recovers the onsite discussions on the present and future of women's cinema in the region during a transitional period marked by the redefinition of its thematic, aesthetic, and industrial outlooks.

Warmi: the first Peruvian women-led film collective

by Isabel Seguí

In the 1990s, in a context marked by Fujimori's regime and runaway inflation, the Peruvian film collective Warmi made a series of documentaries and docudramas, bringing to the fore the life experience of organised women in the margins (indigenous maids, slum-dwellers, girl gang members). This article historicizes the politics behind the alliance between middle-class women filmmakers and grassroots women's groups.

The Women's Film Project:

an international collective in the career of Helena Solberg

by Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco

An analysis of the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics of the International Women's Film Project (IWFP), the only collective to which Helena Solberg belonged throughout her career.

Perspectives dialectically intersected: the Mexican audiovisual collective Los Ingrávidos and its *Film Coyolxauhqui* (2017)

by Raquel Schefer

This article examines the cinematic *praxis* of the Mexican collective Los Ingrávidos, which not only adopts collective modes of organization and deconstructs the dominant audiovisual and cinematic grammar, but it strives to dismantle the hegemonic perceptual, cognitive, representational and scopic regimes determined by the intersection between different categories of domination related to the capitalist-colonial-patriarchal system.

Nosotras, las otras: we, the other women

by Lita Rubiano Tamayo

For more than a decade, in the south of Colombia, in the Amazon and the Andes, two rural collectives of women teach community media making and media literacy. Their projects are an important form of resistance in areas heavily affected by the armed conflict.

LASTESIS

- Introduction: LASTESIS' transnational monster by Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto
- The transformative power of performance by LASTESIS

We are pleased to offer you an excerpt of LASTESIS forthcoming book *Set Fear on Fire!* to be published by Verso in 2023. LASTESIS is an interdisciplinary feminist collective created in 2018 in Valparaiso, Chile, by Daffne Valdés, Paula Cometa, Lea Cáceres and Sibila Sotomayor, renowned for their performance "Un violador en tu camino" (A Rapist in Your Path).

Roundtable with Afroféminas, Colectiva Lemow and Trenzar Perú:

- Julia Cabrera (Afroféminas),
- Teresa Jiménez and Tirza Yanira Ixmucané Saloj Oroxom (Colectiva Lemow, Guatemala),

Alondra Flores and Cristina Renteros (Trenzar Perú)

Art historian Daniela Galán discusses with the members of the collectives Afroféminas, Colectiva Lemow and Trenzar Perú about their visual art, activism and collective work, amongst other issues.

Where intimacy displaces violence: the cinema of Sara Gómez

by Leticia Berrizbeitia Añez

Review of Susan Lord and María Caridad Cumaná, with Víctor Fowler Calzada, eds., *The Cinema of Sara Gómez: Reframing Revolution*

Through a collective retelling of the Afro-Caribbean woman director's life and work, this collection of essays carefully situates the figure and impact of Gómez's cinema, focusing on the intersection between gender and race within the Cuban revolution.

Visualities and the city:

feminizing public spaces through art and media in post 1968 Mexico City

by Márgara Millán

Review of Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda's *Women Made Visible: Feminist Art and Media in Post-1968 Mexico City.*

Do feminist practices create space? Can city space be feminised? And if this is so, how? This book by Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda addresses these questions in a fresh and innovative way, proposing a new form of archive that includes ephemeral practices. A way of feminizing archives, spaces and history.

Bemberg, Martel, Sarmiento:

women's (counter) discourses in Southern Cone cinema

by Karol Valderrama-Burgos

Review of Julia Kratje and Marcela Visconti's *El asombro y la audacia: El cine de María Luisa Bemberg.* Natalia Christofoletti Barrenha's *La experiencia del cine de Lucrecia Martel.* Fernando Pérez and Bruno Cuneo, eds., *Una mirada oblicua: El cine de Valeria Sarmiento.*

Three publications on three influential women filmmakers from Latin America who have (de)constructed knowledge and led the way for a myriad of generations

Gender and sexuality in South Asian cinema

Unmaking Bollywood: style and the political in Made in Heaven

by Meheli Sen

Sexy and smart, Made in Heaven turns the Bollywood melodrama on its head.

An exploration of intersex characters in Indian cinema

by Kamran Qureshi

A critical analysis of the visual representation of people born with the variations of sex characteristics, in Indian films and of the issues they encounter in Indian society.

Daaera: forbidden love and the sensorium of desire in Bombay cinema

by Sangeeta Gupta

An analysis of a 1953 Social film from Bombay cinema dealing with the issues of conjugality, sexuality and forbidden desires.

Hidden fat shaming in Dum Laga ke Haisha

by Diksha Mittal

A critical analysis of how film elements like costume, lighting, sound, and camera framing interact with each other to fat-shame the fat actress under the garb of fat feminism.

Documenting a corporeal history of dance in Hindi cinema

by Rutuja Deshmukh

Review of Usha Iyer's Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema

Rutuja Deshmukh reviews Usha Iyer's book on dance in Hindi cinema, highlighting the corporeal histories and cultural labour.

Bodily fluid: the movement of Bollywood dance from body to body

by Paromita Vohra

Embodied histories of queerness and performance move fluidly alongside tensions of gender, nationalism and desire in Bollywood dance.

Automatic bodies: masculinities, mobilities, nation, and the Bollywood body

by Paromita Vohra

From morals to muscles, the masculine body in Hindi cinema from Independence to Globalisation.

Sunny Leone's amazing grace:

on what it means for a porn star to be a mainstream movie star

by Paromita Vohra.

A porn star becomes a household name in India, in a story about double meanings, singular identities and the borders of respectability.

Umbartha and *Fire*: when women turn to each other to satisfy their needs

by R. Raj Rao

Indian cinema's first encounters with lesbians: two key feature films from the 1990s, revisited by leading Indian gay writer and activist.

<u>Leena Manimekalai's Is It Too Much to Ask?</u> sexual orientation, transphobia, and Tamil society

by Swarnaval Eswaren

This film challanges Indian heteronormativity through the predicament of two well-known transwomen in Chennai, Tamilnadu, in South India, as they struggle to rent an apartment/house, a process that interrogates/uncovers the transphobia of Tamil society.

Gangubai Kathiawadi:

an unconventional Bombay biopic with sex worker as hero

by Monika Mehta and Nilanjana Bhattacharjya

Sanjeev Leela Bhansali's biopic *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2021), about an actual advocate for Bombay's sex workers, draws on both filmic and non-filmic representations of the past to redefine more inclusive histories of the Indian nation and its legitimate citizens

The fault does not lie in the stars:

Indian Matchmaking and gender representations

by Ishita Tiwary.

A personal academic essay, if I may, that critiques the representational strategies of the hit Netflix TV show *Indian Matchmaking* by interlacing textual analysis, memes, reception and personal histories.

A woman for two pennies: the portrayal of women and changing social constructs of gender in Pakistani TV drama

by Iram Qureshi

A study of controversial female characters and the concepts of a 'good' and a 'bad' woman, as defined by a man.

Porn studies: three interviews

by Daniel Laurin, Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies

"The master timeline is an adult film history timeline." with Peter Alilunas

A conversation on pornography research and pedagogy, historiographic methodologies, and the value of mentorship.

Pornography in the house

with Julia Lesage

A personal reflection on living and collaborating with Chuck Kleinhans, and a revisiting of early Feminist responses to pornography.

Confessions of a "Sexpert" with Thomas Waugh

Looking back on 60 years of engaging with, researching, writing about, teaching and defending sexual representation, queer and otherwise.

Independents: new approaches and closer looks

Questions of counter cinema and Sally Potter's YES

by Temmuz Süreyya Gürbüz

This article takes Sally Potter's 2004 film *YES* (and respectively her filmography) as an opportunity to review the discussions around feminist and counter cinema with a focus on postmodernism, for these terms continuously reflect the crisis of representation (and re-emerge) since the 2000s.

Representations of labor in cinema: Skvirsky's *The Process Genre* reveals that which was always there.

by Sam Smucker

Review of Salomé Skiversky's

The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor

Skvirsky argues that labor is more present in cinema than we thought. We just didn't know how to see it.

Photo capture: depiction, extraction, and the work of the camera

by Daniel Freed.

Review of Kevin Coleman and Daniel James, eds.,

Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction

A welcome collection offers substantial and provocative considerations on the underlying ties between photographic reproduction, capitalist hegemony, and aesthetic theory.

A note on content in poor cinema—

critical attractions in Jacob Holdt's American Pictures

by J. Ronald Green

How does a penniless, homeless, long-haired, long-bearded, recently expelled, high-school dropout from Denmark manage to come up with an epic, four-and-a-half-hour, major work of U.S. cinema?

Front-line reports

by Victor Wallis

Review of Christopher Robé and Stephen Charbonneau's

InsUrgent Media from the Front

Media activists teach by learning.

"I want a game with many winners."

A conversation with Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive By Jeremy Butler

Screen/dance in the United States: engaging the moving bodies in moving pictures

by Pamela Krayenbuhl, Hilary Bergen, Colleen Dunagan, Anthea Kraut, Brynn Shiovitz, and Sylvie Vitaglione

An interdisciplinary roundtable discussion about screendance/dance on screen, featuring both film & media scholars and dance scholars

Queer

With people as their unique selves: Jack Smith's theory of visual expression

by Adam Charles Hart

This essay analyzes Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, a foundational film of the queer underground, for its formal negotiations between directorial authorship and the self-presentation of its performers.

Queering/queered Chinese-language cinematic and cultural imaginaries

by Jamie J. Zhao

Review of Shi-Yan Chao's *Queer Representations in Chinese-language Film and the Cultural Landscape*

An overview of queer media cultures and scholarship in the Chinese and Sinophone worlds.

Wishful perceptions and archival fervor in queer cinema theory

by Kevin John Bozelka

Review of Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo eds.,

The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema

This is an essential collection of essays positing wishful perceptions as a crucial component to queer media scholarship.

The prosthetic transgender gaze: Swiss Army Man

by Joshua Bastian Cole

The 2016 film *Swiss Army Man* (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert) crafts trans men into being without even trying to by employing a prosthetic penis as a visual effect and depicting on-screen crotch shots that are perceivable as a spectacle for, and a spectatorship practice among, trans men, thereby producing an unexpected but decidedly trans gaze.

More international

A welcome contribution to decolonizing film fheory

by María Mercedes Vázquez Vázquez.

Review of Nayoung Aimee Kwon, Takushi Odagiri and Moonim Baek, eds., *Theorizing Colonial Cinema: Reframing Production, Circulation, and Consumption of Film in Asia*

An informed, in-depth review of a must-read volume on contemporary film theory expanding beyond Western cinemas.

"Once you're in, there's no way out." Tehran and the politics of erasure

by Anisa Hosseinnezhad.

This essay debunks the political ethos the TV series, *Tehran*'s, creators claimed for their show. They said the show tries to portray the Iranian government's austerity, but instead viewers get a clear glimpse into the realities of their own

nation, Israel.

More U.S. cinema

Psychedelic soldiers and tragic surfers: John Milius' Apocalypse Now (1969) by Jeeshan Gazi.

Exploring the unique themes that mark Milius' first draft screenplay as a work of art distinct from Coppola's iconic New Hollywood movie(s).

Art, activism, sales calls, and slave labor: dialectics in *Sorry to Bother You* by Milo Sweedler.

Boots Riley's witty and hard-hitting anti-capitalist comedy uses two different types of dialectics to tell its story of class conflict in an alternate present-day Oakland, California.

#OscarMustFall: on refusing to give power to unjust definitions of "merit" by Dale Hudson.

#OscarMustFall calls upon film critics, distributors, educators, exhibitors, and makers to recognize that the Oscars' definition of "merit" hides unfair advantages and unearned privileged to disempower and delegitimize the not-White and not-Western perspectives needed for a world in crisis.

The last word: keywords

A book review and a look back at my own scholarship on the religious right. by Julia Lesage

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The first word: another playlist

by Julia Lesage

Rarely do I write an introduction to an issue, but this issue of *Jump Cut* exceeds my expectations for fascinating, sophisticated essays that make a contribution to the field of media studies itself. So here I am reorganizing the table of contents according to my own intellectual interests, which in fact influence the kinds of essays I would like to see more of in *Jump Cut*.

First of all, as you see, there are three large special sections, very different in methodology and emphasis. The first, Marxism and Media Studies, edited by Michael Litwack, Beth Capper, and Christoper Robé was two years in the making, and its editors and authors worked together to craft polished essays that continue *Jump Cut*'s Left focus in new and theoretically varied ways.

The second, Latin American Feminist Film and Visual Art Collectives, edited by Lorena Cervera, Sonia Kerfa and Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto, is an internationally-based multi-lingual endeavor that moved from its origins as an online conference to the publication of these essays. From the beginning, the project has been conducted in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. It exemplifies decolonizing scholarly publication, but whole process also indicates some of the extra effort and cost, especially of translation, that this commitment entails.

The third special section, "Gender and Sexuality in South Asian Media," is edited by Sonal Vij. She has collected a group of highly varied essays from a range of sources and from writers residing in South Asia and abroad. Our goal in planning this section was to place a focus on the social conditions defining gender in the region, explore the resistance to narrow and repressive gender formations, and also consider the very depiction of "body."

I am fascinated how some key topics in media studies are particularly well developed in this issue. Whole intellectual areas are treated in complex new ways. These include the following, which I will describe in more detail below: cinematic and material space, gender and sexuality, archives and media history, new theory, activist media, the political avant-garde, and new perspectives on Hollywood film.

Cinematic and material space: I have a special interest in social space and media space because I taught video production for many years, including teaching spatial composition. Theoretically in media studies, spatial composition takes on new valences because of global environmental crises as well as efforts within academia to decolonize intellectual life and teaching. Furthermore, in political struggles all over the world, space is the locus of both oppression and protest. Essays here that take up the larger political issues related to spatial exploitation/representation include these:

- Morgan Adamson on contemporary shows like those on HGTV (Home and Garden TV channel) which feature the home as a site for entrepreneurship vs. a radical documentary depicting collective home takeovers.
- Curtis Marez on producers' using Southwest United States as a production site for TV series that rarely serve the location's inhabitants, either via representation or employment, as an example of racial capitalism.
- Robert Jackson talking with Métis filmmaker Conor McNally about experimenting with film form to express an indigenous relation to the land that differs from the concept of private property.
- Anisa Hosseinnezhad on an Israeli TV series, *Tehran*, that she finds offers more of a glimpse into Israeli realities than Iran's.
- Márgara Millán on activist women's art collectives redefining Mexican gendered public space in the '70s and on.
- J. Ronald Green on the cinematic attractions of American Pictures, a
 documentary made by a penniless Danish dropout, long accepted in Europe
 as an accurate view of the United States.
- Swarnaval Eswaren on Tamil filmmaker's Leena Manimekalai's feature film *Is It Too Much to Ask?* in which two transwomen cannot find a place to rent in Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.
- Jeremy Butler talking with Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, about embracing the broad historical trajectory of Internet space.

Gender and sexuality: As always, *Jump Cut* welcomes essays that explore media's use of and relation to gender and sexuality, especially when the writers have a new perspective to offer. A number of approaches stand out in this issue. The first approach relates to pornography and porn studies in a very specific way. I and an a University of Oregon colleague, Peter Alilunas, helped place Chuck Kleinhans' large pornography research collection in the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto. Also at the Bonham Centre is the large pornography collection of *Jump Cut* senior editor, Thomas Waugh. Three interviews here are ones that Daniel Laurin, curator of the Kleinhans collection, did as oral history. These are with Julia Lesage, Peter Alilunas, and Thomas Waugh on their personal background and their perspectives on pornography. I suspect that for those of you who know one of us, that may be the first thing you read.

Second, within the special section on Gender and Sexuality in South Asian Media, a number of rhetorical approaches particularly interest me. Some authors trace the use of the actor's body, including casting and costuming, at the same time that they pay close attention to the body in the mise-en-scene, especially when discussing feature films. This approach is found as

- Diksha Mittal explains Bollywood's current fat shaming of female stars;
- Paromita Vohra has one essay on Bollywood masculinities and another on a porn star turned movie star;
- Monika Mehta and Nilanjana Bhattacharjya delineate the visual connotations in a biopic about a Bombay sex worker who becomes an advocate for prostitutes; and
- Sangeeta Gupta analyzes the use of mise-en-scene in a 50s film's depiction of unfulfilled passion where contact is forbidden.

Other authors in that special section on gender focus on television studies from both a national and international perspective. Because worldwide streaming has changed the international mix of daily TV offerings in many countries, I think this is a rich area for study right now, especially in a transcultural context. Here

• Isita Tiwari looks at *Indian Matchmaking* (Netflix) from her position as a diasporic scholar;

Meheli Sen analyzes an Amazon Prime streaming series, *Made in Heaven*, both to compare this format to Bollywood film and also to indicate the more liberal content often found in contemporary fictional film and television in India.

 Also discussing this trend, Iram Qureshi describes a Pakistani serial TV drama, I Have You, that is unusual in depicting a live-in love relationship outside marriage; she finds many conservative elements in the script, such as the contrast between the good and bad woman and the need to punish adultery.

Queer media, viewership, and theory: South Asian *queer* topics are also taken up in the Special Section, with Kamran Qureshi offering an exploration of intersex characters in Indian cinema and R. Raj Rao looking at two of the first Indian features to depict lesbian characters as protagonists. Focusing more on the United States, incorporating a theoretical perspective, and also emphasizing queer reception, three of our authors make a case for queer structures of desire, both within cinematic texts and within viewers. Kevin John Bozelka, reviewing *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, finds that many of the essays in the collection posit wishful perceptions as a crucial component within queer media scholarship. Amplifying this kind of assertion, Joshua Bastian Cole offers a reading of the film *Swiss Army Man*, and Nicole Morse offers one of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* and the TV series *Pose* to posit a transgender gaze, indicating the need to theoretically account for how subcultural groups gain pleasure from dominant media.

Another vital area for film studies now is reimagining how the archive functions, how it might be assembled, and how it might be used. Both the special sections, Latin American Film and Visual Arts Collectives and Marxism and Media Studies have an historical component, looking at the complexities of how we trace the past of neglected or oppressed groups. In fact, many people's history, outlook, and social processes have long been documented in skewed ways, if documented at all. Drawing on Latin American research, Karol Valderrama-Burgos reviews three books on three foundational women filmmakers' work and careers: Maria Luisa Bemberg, Valeria Sarmiento, and Lucrecia Martel. Looking away from auteurs and toward feminist process, Elena Oroz describes "Cocina de imágenes," the first large gathering of Latin American women media makers in Mexico City in 1987. She does so in the context of other important large-scale "encuentros" of Latin American feminists. (Note: I myself attended *Cocina* and audiotaped the workshops and did interviews. In 2020 I had all that material digitized and made available on Dropbox.)

The section on Marxism and Media Studies draws on archives of different kinds.

- Salomé Aguilera Skiversky offers a close analysis of a key political documentary from the past, *The Battle of Chile*; seeing its relevance today, she traces how the film represents the difficulties of strategizing in the midst of a conflicted historical present.
- Yvonne Bramble traces the beginnings of state mass computerization in the United States, and concomitantly the beginnings of surveillance of the poor, here used against the Welfare Rights Movement.
- Richard Purcell returns to the archives of the Black Arts and Black Power
 Movements of the late '60s early '70s to see how they conceived of a
 potential Black audience for literature, art, and film. In doing so, the
 intellectuals and artists in these groups had conflicted views about that
 audience, now turned into a commodity, as theorized by Dallas Smythe.

Book reviews and theory: Of particular interest to me in this issue are the book reviews and other discussions of media and cultural theory. The books

themselves are rife with theoretical insights, and the reviews' authors skillfully articulate the authors' premises. Furthermore, especially when dealing with cultural specificity, the books' editors have made a significant effort to expand their chapter authorship beyond the United States and Europe. For example, the editors' introduction to the Marxism and Media Studies special section, plus the book reviews by Matthew Ellis and Jordan Kinder comprise an extremely sophisticated theoretical discussion of contemporary Left film theory.

Other books reviewed provide an exemplar of how to decolonize academic publication, both from their use of a wide range of international sources and their alternative cultural perspectives. These include book reviews which take up a closer look at media cultures in various parts of the world by Jaimie J. Zhao, Daniel Freed, María Mercedes Vázquez Vázquez, and Leticia Berrizbeitia Añez.

In addition, a unique addition to film theory is the articulation of a new genre, the process genre, by Salomé Skiversky; her book of that name is reviewed by Sam Smucker.

Also with this issue we have initiated an in-depth discussion of the theory of dance on screen, partly in the context of the Gender and Sexuality in South Asian section, with a book review by Rutuja Deshmukh and an essay on Bollywood dance by Paromita Vohra. In this area we are especially pleased to publish an edited transcript of an interdisciplinary roundtable about screen dance, featuring both media and dance scholars. As with the discussion of cinematic space and its relation to geographic space, much has yet to be done on theorizing the media representation of the body in space, especially in historical and intercultural terms.

Activism and the collective process: The special section on Latin America Feminist Film and Visual Art Collectives places an emphasis on alerting us to continental media activism, with Isabel Seguí writing on a feminist collective in Peru, Lita Rubiano Tamayo on work in the Colombian Andes and Amazon, and Marina Calvalcanti Tedesco on the International Women's Film Project. In particular, we are pleased to present the writings of LASTESIS group explaining their theory of performance. LASTESIS is a Chilean group renowned for the worldwide re-enactment of their performance "Un violador en tu camino" (A Rapist in Your Path), introduced here by Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto. Finally, in this context, Victor Wallis reviews a book covering the work of media activism today from around the world: *Insurgent Media from the Front: A Media Activism Reader*, which is especially useful for the way the groups explain their process.

The political avant garde: Activist media has long relied on the documentary as a genre, but I am equally committed to the efforts of the political avant-garde to find new forms to express previously unarticulated visions and concepts, needed for the process of social and perceptual change. Scattered throughout the issue, but taken together these essay offer a theoretically sophisticated look at experiments in cultural production aimed at a social need:

- Raquel Schefer on the Mexican audiovisual collective Los Ingrávidos and its film *Coyolxauhqui*;
- Roundtable with art collectives Afroféminas, Colectiva Lemow and Trenzar Perú:
- Nataleah Hunter-Young's review of Kara Keeling's book, *Queer Times, Black Futures*:
- Temmuz Süreyya Gürbüz on Sally Potter's film YES;
- Adam Charles Hart on Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures.

Hollywood: Finally three essays on Hollywood film show very different but original ways to approach this topic.

- Milo Sweedler looks at how comedy can be structured to both analyze capitalism and give an anti-capitalist message, using as his example Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*.
- Jeeshan Gazi demonstrates a new method for analyzing the Hollywood production process: looking at various drafts of a screenplay and finding that earlier versions often have merits ignored in the final film. He focuses here on John Milius' first draft screenplay for *Apocalypse Now*.
- An unusual essay is the denunciation by Dale Hudson in #OscarMustFall. The points on which he denounces the Oscar are very teachable, and may be useful in class when Oscar season comes around.

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For a Marxist critique of media in the contemporary conjuncture

by Michael Litwack, Beth Capper, and Christopher Robé

Toward the end of the Black Audio Film Collective's documentary essay Handsworth Songs (1986), archival television news footage of police confronting Black and South Asian protesters in 1977 Birmingham cuts to a sequence that refracts this scene of racialized policing through interwoven histories of labor, slavery, empire, and struggle. The sequence opens with a Labor Day parade filmed forty years earlier, featuring a procession of marching bands and horse-drawn carriages scored to the chorus of an extradiegetic song dedicated to British Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald. This actuality footage stages a familiar cinematic portrait of working class representation, one that pivots on a national history of the wage and the white male industrial wage laborer. However, the scene is soon intercut—and undercut—by a counter-narrative of the history of capitalism that exceeds this Eurocentric, nationally-bounded frame. This audiovisual rendering makes perceptible social subjects and formations of racial, gendered, and colonial dispossession central to the reproduction of capitalism that are obscured by the parade's circumscribed "image," to borrow Stuart Hall's words, "of what class is." [1] [open endnotes in new window]

This interjection of alternative experiences of class pervades the film's broader analysis of the uprisings that unfolded across Black and South Asian neighborhoods in Handsworth, Birmingham and Tottenham, London in 1985.[2] Taking these uprisings as a point of departure, *Handsworth Songs* offers a meditation on race, gender, migration, and class composition, and their rearticulation and revision through struggles over anti-Black violence, police power, housing justice, and unemployment in postcolonial Britain.

In the aforementioned sequence, the Labor Day song continues to play as the image track cuts away to a highly stylized museum-like tableau of objects that the camera tracks in a series of a close ups: a Union Jack draped beside the reproduction of a 1585 proto-ethnographic watercolor painting of Manteo, a leader of the Croatoan people, in what is now known as North Carolina; a 1918 issue of *National Geographic* on "The Races of Europe"; and, finally, a bundle of iron chains. In the absence of an anchoring voice-over, the tableau poses the question of the relation between these emblems of settler colonialism, imperial knowledge production, and racial slavery, as well as the processes of displacement and plunder through which they came to inhabit this tableau as hermetically sealed artifacts of official national history. The sequence then cuts to tinted footage from an industrial film that depicts laboring white men making chains in a metalwork factory. Moving from the tableau to the industrial factory and back again, *Handsworth Songs* holds together, within this single sequence, multiple modes of social and spatial differentiation—between those who own the means of



production and those who have been expropriated from their means of subsistence; between waged and unwaged labor; and between various peoples who are positioned asymmetrically in their negative relation to the wage.[3] The montage pulls our attention to a set of accumulated fragments, to the wreckage of racial capitalism's processes of worlding, that continue to exert their lethal force on the present.

This dossier takes its inspiration from the Black Audio Film Collective's inquiry into the multiple contradictions and fissures that constitute the capitalist mode of production in its racial, gendered, imperial, and colonial character. Through *Handsworth Song's* strategic appropriation of TV newsreel and actuality footage, the film illustrates how popular audiovisual media actively participate in producing narratives of class society and class struggle. And, more significantly, it intervenes in these narratives by establishing the inextricable connections among processes of accumulation, exploitation, and dispossession.

Contemporary Marxist criticism has been reenergized by indispensable concepts







Media mogul Mark Levin, author of *American Marxism*, links the destruction of U.S. apartheid monuments to the resurgence of a shapeshifting Marxism. Like other reactionaries, he extends the vilification and criminalization of Black communism and Black radicalism that are central to the U.S. social formation.

implicitly at play in *Handsworth Songs*: racial capitalism, social reproduction, primitive accumulation, and colonial dispossession. Crucially, much of this work in Marxist criticism draws its energy from recent instances in ongoing struggles against state, corporate, and intimate violence, including Indigenous movements to resist land theft and resource extraction, such as Idle No More, #NoDAPL, and the Unist'ot'en Camp; Black-led uprisings against police power; the wave of global anti-austerity protests that erupted after the Great Recession of 2007; and the Global Women's Strike, among others. These movements reactivate longer theoretical and political genealogies that illuminate capitalism as a more complex totality of social forces. This special section aims to explore how these genealogies of Marxist criticism and praxis can open up further avenues for making sense of—and intervening in—our media and technological landscape in the present conjuncture.

We find ourselves again in the midst of an intense backlash against Marxist and left traditions of social upheaval both in North America and across the globe. An explicit anti-communist animus has returned to centerstage in popular rightwing discourses, from the criminalization of critical race theory and discussions of sexual and gender identity within educational institutions to headlines that warn "Marxism Underpins Black Lives Matter Agenda."[4] As the syndicated radio host of the eponymous *The Mark Levin Show* recently inveighed on Fox News,

"What we have today are people pulling down monuments, effectively burning books, shutting down debate, attacking free speech, trying to balkanize the nation on race, on gender, on income. Isn't this fundamentally quintessentially Marxism dressed up as something else?"[5]

In such revanchist expressions, Marxism appears as an ever-moving target. But the rightwing attribution of critical race theory and the destruction of Confederate monuments to a thinly-camouflaged Marxism nevertheless betrays the persistent inseparability of anti-communism and anti-Blackness in the modern United States. [6] Together, these forces continue to criminalize, repress, and condemn Black radicalism and internationalist movements for racial and economic justice.

The backlash against these movements is, however, a thoroughly bipartisan affair. The announcement by mainstream media pundits of a "return to normal" with the 2020 U.S. election of Joe Biden aimed to resecure consent to a liberal hegemony apparently debased by the Trump administration's "illiberal" antics. On the heels of mass protests against police murder and louder and louder calls to defund the police, this so-called "return to normal" has yielded a continued commitment to growing police budgets sounded by the counterinsurgent rallying cry, "Fund the police. Fund them. Fund them."[7] It has also brought unwavering support for genocidal military and security regimes both in the U.S. and abroad, inaction on the devastating student debt crisis, and the failure to provide economic relief, labor protections, and healthcare access during a pandemic that has killed over one million people in the U.S. alone. These exigencies of the present underline the need for media scholars, practitioners, and publics to revisit traditions of Marxist theory and praxis that have struggled to dismantle anti-Blackness, white supremacy, colonialism, cis-heteropatriarchy, and empire in their complex intersections with capitalism. Reactiving these genealogies also requires upending the epistemic and citational commitment to whiteness that still dominates film and media studies, including the field's received histories of Marxism.[8]





"So happy Biden won, now things can go back to normal."



U.S. President Joe Biden makes an emphatic call to "fund the police" in his 1 March 2022 State of the Union Address, with Vice President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi standing in ovation behind him.

Our dossier begins from the premise that Marxism has been central to the intellectual formation of film and media studies (FMS), from discipline-defining concepts such as ideology and hegemony to the field's longstanding concern with production cultures and material apparatuses. At the same time, however, the place of Marxism within FMS in our current moment appears more diffuse and nebulous. Some critics contend that a commitment to Marxist critique has waned within FMS in recent decades. [9] Others similarly note that, in a capitulation to the anti-communism that continues to pervade academia (particularly in the U.S.), Marxist FMS has been prematurely cast as an "outmoded project." [10] But it is also the case that the sheer expansion of FMS since the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as the encounter between cinema studies and the more amorphous fields of media studies and cultural studies, has led to a dispersion—rather than a simple eclipse-of Marxist critique. In other words, while in North America a limited set of proper names (e.g., Sergei Eisenstein, Jean-Luc Godard), movements (e.g., Soviet montage, Third Cinema, Situationist film, the Left Bank Group), and forums (e.g., Screen, Cahiers du Cinéma, Jump Cut itself) perhaps once served as metonyms for Marxist approaches to film and media, the proliferation of media criticism across academic and non-academic publishing venues and through a wide range of academic disciplines makes it more difficult today to assess the state of an overall Marxist FMS.

On the one hand, recent currents in Marxist media criticism have extended enduring concerns in the field. Much of the most compelling work on digital technologies, for instance, builds on abiding interests in both the political economy of production and the capacity of media to represent the totality of capitalist social relations. Such tendencies are exemplified in key studies of global electronics manufacturing and data visualization.[11] This critical work refuses to indulge in the hyperbole that often surrounds discussions of new media. Instead, it remains attentive to the historical specificity of emergent media technologies and practices while situating these phenomena within longer histories of media technology, culture, and political economy. Likewise, recent media criticism has interrogated the viability of media visibility and representation as emancipatory strategies for disenfranchised communities that remain mired in underfunded neighborhoods, eviscerated social services, and unstable and poor waged jobs, if any. Such analysis draws on Marx's insight into the ways that formal inclusion and abstract equality legitimate and heighten brutal material inequalities.[12]

On the other hand, despite these continuities between the pasts and presents of Marxist FMS, it strikes us that, within the last decade, renewed engagements with Marxist critique have supplemented questions of ideology and the critique of commodity fetishism that arguably once dominated the reception of Marxism in North American film and media studies. This is not to suggest that the imperative of ideology critique has in any way waned, nor is it to say that the many materialist strategies for reading media and culture that have emerged through an encounter with Capital, Vol. 1's first chapter on "Commodities" have lost their urgency. But it is to register a reorientation in the kinds of theoretical commitments, archives, and political histories that have been brought to the fore within film and media criticism. Writing with the aim of contributing to these reorientations, the authors in our special section train our attention on aesthetic, political, and theoretical activity that has brought to FMS more analytic precision in deciphering the role that media play in reproducing capitalist processes of dispossession, immiseration, and disposability, but also in imagining alternatives to these violent processes.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Already in 1964, the Black radical sociologist Oliver C. Cox argued that Marx's account of primitive accumulation was better understood as "none other than fundamentally capitalist accumulation" itself.



Indigenous land defenders at Wet'suwet'en resist the ongoing accumulation of Indigenous lands by the settler colonial capitalist state of so-called Canada.

Undoubtedly, the most important developments in Marxist approaches to film and media have taken shape through the transformative force of Black, Indigenous, feminist, queer, and trans intellectual traditions that alert us to capitalism's historical tendency "not to homogenize but to differentiate." [13] [open endnotes in new window] This body of work emphasizes how struggles beyond the point of production constitute a fundamental terrain where regimes of value production and capital accumulation have been challenged. Much of this work, though certainly not all of it, has proceeded from a critical rereading of "So-Called Primitive Accumulation," the eighth part of Capital, Vol. I. Here, Marx famously spurns the idyllic account of the origins of capitalism proposed by classical political economists, showing how "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, [and] force" provided the brutal conditions of possibility for "the dawn of the era of capitalist production." [14] In retracing capitalism's murderous origins, Marx thus adumbrates "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production"—through land expropriation, colonization, and slavery that "forms the pre-history of capital." [15]

However, as Cedric J. Robinson, Silvia Federici, and Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) have all variously argued, Marx's temporal framing of this "pre-history" risks presenting imperial conquest, dispossession, slavery, and unfree labor as discrete historical phenomena that set in motion the capitalist mode of production rather than as defining and extant features of capitalist social relations. [16] Indigenous scholars have further complicated the concept of primitive accumulation by focusing attention on the foundational and ongoing settler colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples and lands. While, according to Coulthard, Marx's discussion of so-called primitive accumulation privileged the transformation of people into wage laborers, settler colonial capitalist states "require[] first and foremost [Indigenous] land, and only secondarily the surplus value afforded by cheap, Indigenous labor. [17] As such, Coulthard continues,

"the theory and practice of Indigenous anticolonialism, including Indigenous anticapitalism, is best understood as a struggle primarily inspired by and oriented around the question of land....and less around our emergent status as 'rightless proletarians.'"[18]

An account of dispossession hence critically recalibrates Marx's theses on exploitation and primitive accumulation by illuminating social sites and movements that have tended to "fall away" from Marxist preoccupations with labor and the laboring subject.[19]

The question of the laboring subject and the subject of struggle has also been reinvigorated by Marxist feminist theories of social reproduction. Some Marxist feminists have used the term "social reproduction" to describe the role of racialized and feminized activities in reproducing labor power, including domestic work, sex work, and caring labor. [20] But while social reproduction describes the means through which capitalist society endures, it is also an insurgent terrain for the reproduction of alternative forms of life within, against, and beyond capitalism. Although crises of social reproduction are endemic to capitalism, critics contend that a crisis of social reproduction has intensified through neoliberal transformations in and after the 1970s.

During this period, the wide-scale crises of capitalist accumulation stemming from economic stagflation yielded virulent assaults on social reproduction. The



Founded in 1974, the International Wages for Housework Movement was a campaign that demanded wages for domestic, emotional, and sexual labor, with the goal of illuminating the obscured feminized work that sustains the capitalist mode of production.



Dr. Cedric J. Robinson (1940-2016).

management of capitalist crises took shape through the defunding of social welfare, structural adjustment programs that privatized care, and the expansion of carceral systems designed to manage populations rendered superfluous by capital. These assaults were themselves strategies of domestic and global warfare against militant social reproduction struggles, such as, in the U.S., the swelling of welfare rolls achieved by the National Welfare Rights Organization and community-led mutual aid programs and alternative social infrastructures that groups like the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords cultivated. [21] These histories galvanize a more capacious analysis of social reproduction. Activists and scholars have thus insisted that social reproduction is better understood as a unifying framework that aims to grasp the totality of capitalist social relations, which are irreducible to the formal wage relation. This entails working to understand how capitalist accumulation is constitutively reproduced through, and is reproductive of, interlinked forms of social differentiation and uneven (de)valuation. Such a perspective opens onto a wider coalitional vision of social reproduction struggles that braids together interconnected movements, from housing justice to prison abolition, mobilizing on behalf of more emancipatory configurations of collective life. [22]





The National Welfare Rights Movement, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and the Young Lords theorized expansive conceptions of social reproduction as a key terrain of anticapitalist struggle and radical life-making

These ongoing interventions in the history of Marxist thought have been registered in multiple ways across the landscape of contemporary FMS. Very schematically, we wish to highlight some important (though certainly not exhaustive) developments to which our special section contributes. Notably, we observe a heightened, necessary, and overdue engagement with the analytic of racial capitalism first outlined by Cedric J. Robinson in his landmark 1983 book, Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition. Racial capitalism describes the historical inseparability of racial regimes from processes of economic exploitation, accumulation, dispossession, and disposability; it makes clear that capitalism is and has always been an indelibly racial formation.[23] This radical insight demands nothing less than rethinking the entire history of media over at least the last 700 years. Drawing on the pathfinding work of the historian Stephanie Smallwood and the Black feminist theorist Katherine McKittrick, media theorists have thus recently tracked how digital computation is enabled by the modes of abstraction, calculation, and financial speculation first born through transatlantic racial slavery.[24]





Stills from Shohini Ghosh's documentary *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2002), which explores the struggles of sex workers in West Bengal to form a union, and Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), which is a social satire of workers in a call center. Critics have discussed both films as examples of the shifting representation of labor in contemporary cinema

Increasing recognition of the conceptual utility of racial capitalism has further inspired new approaches for theorizing and historicizing dynamics of media production, distribution, circulation, and reception across historical and geopolitical settings. This is evidenced in studies that have extended and modified Robinson's work to address topics as varied as computation and carceral power, early televisual representations of Black women's domestic labor, the relation of lynching photography to law-and-order politics, videogames and Indigenous dispossession, collusions between the film industry and the modern university, and the problem of "diversity" in mainstream media production practices. [25]





Rosetta (dir. Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 1999) and *Us* (dir. Jordan Peele, 2019) are two films that differently explore the expansion of surplus populations within contemporary capitalism.

These media histories of racial capitalism have also accompanied shifts in the ways that critics have understood the relations between media and labor from the standpoints of representation, production, and spectatorship. Film scholars have begun to decenter a narrow focus on images of industrial labor to account for cinematic portrayals of service, reproductive, criminalized, and "gig" work, as well as of the unemployed and dispossessed. [26] We view this turn not merely as a project of archival expansion but as an effort to actively re-evaluate the meanings and limits of labor as an object of knowledge in the history of film and film theory. [26]

Concurrently, digital media scholars have rethought "media labor" by deploying the insights of post-Autonomist Marxists, who argue that neoliberalism has subsumed social life under the sphere of production such that cultural, creative, and communicative activities emerge as directly valorizable sites for the





The international division of labor differentiates "playbor" in the global North from the superexploitation of so-called gold farmers who "play" *World of Warcraft* and other massively multiplayer online games to earn virtual "gold" for consumers.





Stills from Med Hondo's West Indies: The

generation of profit.[27] As these arguments have been taken up in media studies, they have informed powerful critiques of the monetization and expropriation of user-generated content and services through the Internet and social media. But they have also been modified and critiqued by media and cultural critics. Some stress that the post-Autonomists owe an oft-unacknowledged debt to Marxist feminist, Black Marxist, and women of color theories of reproductive labor.[28] Others have pointed out how undifferentiated accounts of communicative labor obscure the international division of labor and the racial and gender hierarchies that stratify media and cultural work.[28b]

Indeed, the post-Autonomist claim that neoliberal capitalism has harnessed and monetized all activity under its reign ignores the stark realities of deindustrialization, automation, uneven global trade liberalization, and capital flight where more and more people have been pushed outside the formal wage relation, either forced permanently into informal and criminalized activities or targeted for elimination. This surplusing of racialized populations and the expansion of precarious employment demand a qualification to attempts to apprehend the connection between capitalism and contemporary media foremost in terms of an expansion of productive labor. For the informal media labor of vulnerable and dispossessed communities—on social media platforms, in lowwaged mobile app-based service work, or through hustling bootlegged media—must all be conceived as improvisatory practices of survival performed in response to organized abandonment by neoliberal states and mass expulsion from the productive process.[29]

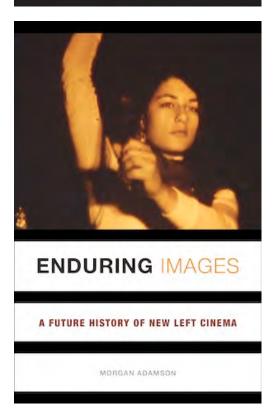
Significantly, these recalibrations of media in relation to gendered racial colonial capitalism and against the backdrop of transformations in class composition have assisted in developing new work on Black radical, anticolonial, and left media production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. Overdue archival studies have clarified wider histories and geographies of Third Cinema, from the overlooked films of Med Hondo and Sara Gómez to Third Cinema's transnational affinities with the media production of Arab resistance movements and with radical mediamakers in the global North such as the L.A. Rebellion.[30] This work attunes us to the incisive function of audiovisual media in cultivating emergent forms of social organization and sustaining international solidarities across the twentieth century. The rich archives uncovered by these studies also provide a critical riposte to the hackneyed debates that still pit the critique of political economy against the politics of social difference. In this way, the archival impulse driving much of this recent writing registers that radical media practices of the past can carry "the affective qualities of resistance across historical eras," inspiring necessary debates in the present about the politics of aesthetics and strategies for organizing.[31]

Critics studying media activism and community media have also started to engage vernacular forms of disposable media made by everyday people that serve central functions in collective organizing and other practices of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial resistance.[32] Energized by contemporary social movements that have reckoned with the affordances and limits of digital media to foster collective action, this scholarship has revivified attention to media activism in ways that haven't been seen in decades. For example, the Activism, Communication and Social Justice special interest group was founded in 2018 within the International Communication Association and the Activist and Revolutionary Film and Media

Fugitive Slaves of Liberty (1979) and Sara Gómez's De cierta manera / One Way or Another (1974).

Creating a New Black Cinema

Ected by ALLYSON NADIA FIELD, IAN-CHRISTOPHER HORAX, and JACQUELINS NAJUMA STEWART



The past decade has witnessed an outpouring of new historiographies of left and radical cinemas, such as those of the L.A. Rebellion and Third World Newsreel. special interest group was created in 2019 within the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, both reflecting this surge of interest in these areas of study.

In planning this special section, we wanted to take stock of, and build upon, what we saw as these important directions in contemporary FMS that are in dialogue with the many inspiring uprisings and liberation movements unfolding around us. This project, we found, required reflecting on the potentially totalizing impulse that accompanies any effort to cull an unruly living archive of resistance, refusal, rebellion, rage, and resurgence under the tidy banner of "Marxist media studies." As Robinson never ceased reminding us, Marx's belief that capitalism's rationalization of social relations would produce the proletariat as the universal revolutionary subject of history obscured other spheres, subjects, and traditions of socialism and revolutionary action—in particular, the Black radical tradition that Robinson so aptly named.[33] Robinson's point was that an abundance of always actually existing socialist and egalitarian social formations preceded and exceeded not only the proper name "Marx" but also the development of capitalism itself. The discontinuous genealogy of alternative, non-proprietary forms of social relationship that emerges from such a disclosure compels us to approach Marxism not as "the conceptual pinnacle of socialist [and communist] thought" but rather as an especially generative and contentious site of collective cathexis and revolutionary desire that underwrites the enduring histories of media and struggle.[34]

The articles in this section therefore do not reply in unison to the question "What is the state of Marxist film and media studies today?" Nor do they all agree about the determinations that define the specificity of *this* "today," of *this* conjuncture. But they do all argue for the indispensability of a capacious and open-ended Marxism to the projects of media study and practice. In this sense, our contributions together form a discordant chorus like Marxism itself, which, as Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke write in *Transgender Marxism*, "is a broad and living tradition, defined by its continual internal disputations, its vying schools, and its contested orthodoxies."[35]

The contributors to this special section largely focus on media texts and practices that emerge in relation to histories of U.S. and Canadian state formation, though several of the articles accent the transnational contexts of the media practices that they explore and others pivot on geopolitical locations, such as Chile, that have been subject to U.S. imperialism and anti-communist militarism. In so doing, the contributors revisit the question of Marxism and media studies from three distinct but overlapping angles. The first concerns the issue of genealogies and inheritances. Several articles in the dossier return to key archives in the history of critical media thought and praxis in order to trace alternative and future pathways for our field. Reactivating both canonical texts (e.g., Jennie Livingston's Paris is Burning, Patricio Guzmán's La batalla de Chile: La lucha de un pueblo sin armas) and ones that are still under-read in FMS (e.g., Jonnie Tillmon's "Welfare is a Women's Issue," Hoyt W. Fuller's Negro Digest/Black World, Cedric J. Robinson's Forgeries of Memory & Meaning, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's [Anishinaabe] As We Have Always Done), they constellate a set of essential keywords and methods—"place," "housing," "the anti-audience," "engineered counterinsurgency," "materialist trans feminist analysis," "re-enlivening" (to name only a few)—that refract and expand the horizon for film and media criticism.

The second line of inquiry addresses the complex tangle between, on the one hand, the role of media in ideologically legitimating capitalist assaults on working class communities, and, on the other, the ways that media technologies and industries directly participate in these assaults. This relation is expertly addressed by Robinson in *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning*, a text that should occupy a more prominent position within FMS. In this book, Robinson asserts that motion

pictures played a central role in establishing a new racial regime after the formal collapse of slavery in the United States and the short-circuiting of Reconstruction. Robinson explains

"how the needs of finance capital, the dominant center of American commerce in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, determined the construction of successive racial regimes publicized by motion pictures." [36]

Thinking alongside Robinson's historiographic project allows us to understand the intense complicity between dominant representational "protocols of race, class, gender, and authority" and the economic interests of capital, including real estate and property development (i.e., ownership of movie houses) and the corporate control of broadcast technology maintained through the expansion of U.S. empire.[37] Several articles in our dossier extend this methodological insight in order to disinter the collusion between media industries, racially gendered statecraft, and economies of displacement and dispossession across disparate historical settings. Contributors explore the deployment of computational technologies in the U.S. state's war against Black working-class women on welfare, the deleterious impact of tax incentives programs and state subsidies for TV production in Georgia and New Mexico, and the role of televisual and digital media in fostering real estate speculation.

Finally, many of our contributors take up the relations between film, media, and social movements. Some contributors, for instance, insistently probe whether yesterday's political filmmaking practices can offer instructive lessons for navigating the challenges in front and ahead of us. Rather than viewing political films of the 1960s and 70s as mere documents of another moment, these articles instead suggest that past films can serve as "organizing primers" with the capacity to stimulate critical thinking about the political tactics and strategies we need today. Other contributors, by contrast, interrogate the very parameters of the political, querying what is invoked, and what is occluded, by terms like "political film" and "political media." Still others interrogate how "politics," as a privileged interpretive lens for reading and evaluating media, can potentially subsume forms of life-making and relationality that exceed the domain of the political as it has been defined within and beyond the western philosophical tradition.

WAGES AGAINST HOUSEWORK

They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.

They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism.

Every miscarriage is a work accident.

Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both working conditions . . . but homosexuality is workers' control of production, not the end of work.

More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so powerful in destroying the healing virtues of a smile.

Neuroses, suicides, desexualisation: occupational diseases of the housewife.

THEY SAY IT'S FRIENDSHIP. WE SAY IT'S UNWAGED WORK. WITH EVERY LIKE, CHAT, TAG OR POKE OUR SUBJECTIVITY TURNS THEM A PROFIT. THEY CALL IT SHARING. WE CALL IT STEALING. WE'VE BEEN BOUND BY THEIR TERMS OF SERVICE FAR TOO LONG—IT'S TIME FOR OUR TERMS.

CAPITAL HAD TO CONVINCE US THAT IT IS A NATURAL, UNAVOIDABLE AND EVEN FULFILLING ACTIVITY TO MAKE US ACCEPT UNWAGED WORK. IN ITS TURN, THE UNWAGED CONDITION OF FACEBOOK HAS BEEN A POWERFUL WEAPON IN REINFORCING THE COMMON ASSUMPTION THAT FACEBOOK IS NOT WORK, THUS PREVENTING US FROM STRUGGLING AGAINST IT. WE ARE SEEN AS USERS OR POTENTIAL FRIENDS, NOT WORKERS IN STRUGGLE. WE MUST ADMIT THAT CAPITAL HAS BEEN VERY SUCCESSFUL IN HIDING OUR WORK.

WAGES FOR FACEBOOK, THEN, IS A REVOLUTIONARY DEMAND NOT BECAUSE BY ITSELF IT DESTROYS CAPITAL, BUT BECAUSE IT ATTACKS CAPITAL AND FORCES IT TO RESTRUCTURE SOCIAL RELATIONS IN TERMS MORE FAVORABLE TO US AND CONSEQUENTLY MORE FAVORABLE TO WORKING CLASS SOLIDARITY. IN FACT, TO DEMAND WAGES FOR FACEBOOK DOES NOT MEAN TO SAY THAT IF WE ARE PAID WE WILL CONTINUE TO DO IT. IT MEANS PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE.

-WAGESFORFACEBOOK.COM

The artist Laurel Ptak's 2014 web-based project *Wages for Facebook* redeploys Silvia Federici's iconic 1975 "Wages against Housework" manifesto. In so doing, Ptak alerts us to the sexual division of reproductive labor that haunts accounts of the expansion of the productive process through digital media.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA





Stills from Guzmán's La Batalla de Chile: La lucha de un pueblo sin armas / The Battle of Chile: The Struggle of a People Without Arms.





Stills from McNally's ôtênaw.

The dossier opens with Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky's essay "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Patricio Guzman: Lessons from The Battle of Chile (1975-9)." Engaging Guzman's epic Third Cinema documentary through the lens of Marx's The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Skvirsky argues that The Battle of Chile, like Marx's text before it, offers a method for critically analyzing—and responding tactically to—moments of political upheaval. Skvirsky reads how Guzman's film represents the conditions and power struggles that led to the 1973 Chilean coup that overthrew Salvador Allende's socialist government, installing Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in its place. Through close attention to the film's treatment of person-on-the-street interviews, Skvirsky contends that The Battle of Chile encourages audiences to cultivate strategic thinking about the relations among more immediate forms of political self-expression and the structural forces that shape contemporary events. This is instructive, she suggests, not only for reflecting on how the Chilean coup became both possible and permissible, but for left political organizing against rightwing populism today. Commentary on The Battle of Chile has often focused on how the film dissects a particular moment of political upheaval within the history of socialism. But Skvirsky alternatively insists that Guzman's work, along with other works of political documentary from the past, must be "re-enlivened" so that the problems of organizing they engage become newly available for debate.

Issues concerning history, aesthetics, and the politics of the "now" are also distilled in "Grounded Abstractions," Rob Jackson's interview with the Métis filmmaker Conor McNally. Focusing on McNally's experimental documentary ôtênaw (2017), which provides a meditation on nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) philosophy and settler colonial development in amiskwacîwâskahikan (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada), Jackson and McNally's conversation addresses Indigenous resurgence and Fourth Cinema, contemporary Cree aesthetics, and the form of the political itself. As Jackson deftly argues, ôtênaw's experimental use of abstraction and archival photography materializes a philosophy of history that at once extends and reworks Walter Benjamin's enigmatic figure of the dialectical image. If, for Benjamin, it is the lightning flash of the dialectical image that allows us to encounter the complex coincidence between "the now" and "what-has-been," ôtênaw powerfully re-visions this image in specifically land-based terms.[38] [open endnotes in new window] In so doing, the film's aesthetic composition instantiates an immanent critique of the Canadian settler state's protracted drive to transform nêhiyaw land-based kinship relations into property relations. But ôtênaw also indicates that the survivance of Indigenous placed-based relationships to land—as a material, spiritual, and legal system of reciprocal obligations—is irreducible to this critique of the past and present tenses of settler colonial capitalism. In this regard, ôtênaw's affirmation of nêhiyaw philosophy, life, and land doubles as a refusal to instrumentalize Indigeneity as purely the negation of settler colonialism. This affirmative refusal, McNally and Jackson suggest, raises questions about the reception of Indigenous media practice on the left. It also brings into relief the possibilities and limits of "political film" as a conceptual frame for engaging Indigenous media that refuse both the logics of settler colonialism and the established audiovisual idioms for its political critique.

Curtis Marez's "Contemporary Television and Racial Capitalism in Place" similarly employs a place-based methodology. Marez brings together an analysis of the production contexts of contemporary programs such as *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13), *Better Call Saul* (AMC, 2015-), *Watchmen* (HBO, 2020), and





Curtis Marez shows how attending to racial capitalism in place reveals the contradictory relations among TV industries, state practices, and on-screen representations.

Lovecraft Country (HBO, 2020) with readings of their contradictory representations of racialized labor and criminality. Exploring these popular shows through the media tax incentive programs that subsidize their production—and that bolster racial and class inequalities—he develops the analytic of "racial capitalism in place" to apprehend how partnerships between states and media industries exacerbate racialized immiseration in site-specific locations. In so doing, Marez recasts Robinson's interventions in Forgeries of Memory & Meaning to explore the political economy of place while also responding to the challenges provoked by neoliberalism's rhetorics of diversity and its sanctioned forms of antiracism. For, as Marez charts, an uneasy tension pervades programs like Watchmen and Lovecraft Country that thematically critique white supremacy but depend upon racial capitalism for their very existence.

Like Marez, Morgan Adamson argues for a renewed concentration on the politics of space and place and, in particular, on real estate as a key terrain of value production and resistance. Housing, Adamson observes, "opens onto a tangle of essential problems and concepts that Marxist critiques of media have elided," including struggles in the sphere of social reproduction. Her contribution, "Residential Autonomy: Economies of Dispossession and their Undoing in Rompiendo puertas/Break and Enter (1971)," tracks the role of media within the resistance movements of working-class Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporic communities against the allied forces of real estate developers, landlords, and the state. On the one hand, popular media and digital technologies reproduce the relations of force central to gentrification. On the other hand, Adamson demonstrates that alternative media practices hold the capacity to visualize and produce what she calls "residential autonomy." Her essay explores how the New Left film collective Newsreel co-created a documentary called Rompiendo puertas/Break and Enter (1970) that chronicles Operation Move-in, a series of building takeovers of unoccupied and abandoned buildings on Manhattan's Upper West Side organized by activists in protest of the city's housing policies. The film's vision of an emancipatory politics of residential self-determination is instructive for our present moment, particularly in light of the intensification of housing insecurity wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic.





Reproducing residential autonomy in Rompiendo puertas / Break and Enter.

Remaining on the terrain of social reproduction, Yvonne Bramble's article maps the confrontation between the National Welfare Rights Organization and the development of computer-based fraud auditing systems aimed at surveilling, criminalizing, and immobilizing working-class women. In "'I am a statistic': Engineering Counterinsurgency against the Welfare Rights Movement," Bramble traces how in the late 1960s and 1970s the state of California, in partnership with computer corporations, seized upon technology in order to dismantle welfare programs through an appeal to computation's alleged transparency and neutrality. She shows that activists in the Welfare Rights Movement along with their allies challenged—both in the courts and in the street—pernicious fantasies of computational transparency and efficiency that accompanied computerized





Santiago Álvarez's 1965 audiovisual assemblage in Now! offers a revisionary history and analysis of fascism in solidarity with Black internationalist movements.

data administrative systems. Bramble's media history of welfare intervenes in contemporary discourses of digital labor, including those that highlight how digital technologies mediate reproductive labor, by establishing that computation has been enlisted not only to extract surplus value but also to target poor Black women and women of color for zero-reproduction.



SISTER JOHNNIE TILLMAN, National Director of the National Welfare Rights Organization.



to operate a Digitronic 200 printer.

Welfare rights activists' struggles against administrative technologies reframe our understanding of the connections between computational media and assaults on social reproduction

Richard Purcell's contribution pivots on a contemporaneous but distinct tendency in the history of twentieth-century Black freedom struggle. Purcell provides a critical supplement to studies of the Black Arts Movement's literary and aesthetic production by honing in on an understudied problem that concerned the Movement: the audience. In "Disruptive Nationalisms: Aesthetics, Markets, and the Anti-Audience of Black Media," Purcell examines how the Black Arts Movement and other media-makers aligned with Black Power sought to reoccupy the time of mass media consumption towards the cultivation of Black radical and revolutionary subjectivities. To do so, Purcell examines the circulation of the magazine Negro Digest/Black World and the cinema of Melvin Van Peebles through Dallas Smythe's concept of the audience commodity. For the Black Arts Movement, viewing and reading appeared as contested and potentially oppositional activities where "surplus time [in] excess of the working day" might be released from its capture by capitalist mechanisms of audience formation and redirected toward liberatory ends.[39] (Figs. 56, 57)





Richard Purcell argues that the Black Arts Movement ambivalently mobilized mass media like magazines and cinema within and against the form of the audience-commodity.

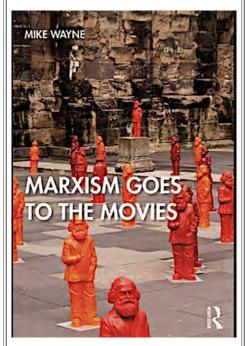
Nicole Morse's contribution, "Give Us Our Bread and Our Roses: A Materialist Trans Feminist Approach to Media," also concerns media reception and its political possibilities by highlighting a pervasive transmisogynist tendency within ostensibly progressive and Marxist discourses that cast trans demands for access to gender-affirming recognition as symptomatic of late capitalist cultures of consumerism. Within media criticism, this tendency is exemplified by the facile charge of "capitalist complicity" leveraged at trans people's desires for, and pleasures in, trans representation on screen. Against such a reductive position, Morse advances a materialist trans feminist approach to media that is attentive to how "trans and queer communities understand, negotiate, and describe the material conditions they confront within capitalism" by analyzing two texts about Black trans and queer ballroom culture created decades apart: the TV drama Pose (FX, 2018-21) and Jennie Livingston's iconic documentary Paris is Burning (1990). Reading *Paris* back through the lens of *Pose*, they argue that Livingston's formal strategies encouraged a reading of ballroom culture as complicit with capitalist and white supremacist values. By contrast, Pose's representation of trans people's desires for pleasure, joy, and luxury opens onto "a critique of what is in the name of what could be." Ultimately, Morse suggests that access to trans cultural production must be understood as a key facet of a trans Marxist politics.

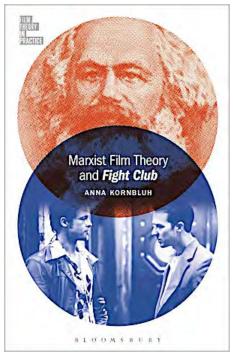


Our special section concludes with three review essays. In their contributions, Matt Ellis and Jordan Kinder each address current theoretical and methodological debates within media scholarship, and mine their resonances for students, teachers, and practitioners of media. Ellis's article evaluates two recent monographs that differently respond to the question, "Whatever Happened to Marxist Film Theory?": Anna Kornbluh's *Marxist Film Theory and* Fight Club (2019) and Mike Wayne's *Marxism Goes to the Movies* (2019).



Pose (FX, 2018-21) [top] and *Paris is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990) [bottom] are leveraged by Nicole Morse in their development of a materialist trans feminist approach to media.





Matt Ellis situates two recent monographs in the context of Marxist film theory's institutional histories and futures.

Whereas Wayne provides a layered genealogy of the development of Marxist film analysis that pivots on the political economy of media industries and the enduring resources of the British tradition of cultural studies, Kornbluh more pointedly historicizes a retreat from Marxism in film theory since the 1980s and develops specific strategies for reinvigorating a historical materialist film-theoretical project in the present conjuncture. As Ellis elucidates, when read together, these books indicate the importance of returning Marxist film theory to the center of a film studies curriculum while also modeling, in a deeply pedagogical manner, the practical activity of Marxist film criticism. While Ellis lingers on debates internal to Marxist media criticism, Kinder's essay "Settler Infrastructuralism" stages a confrontation between historical materialism and the so-called materialist media theory most associated with the Toronto School of Communication and German variants of media archaeology. This latter tendency has again come to prominence through the burgeoning study of media infrastructures and the entwinement of media technologies with environmental violence. Considering the points of potential contact between these critical traditions, Kinder offers a reading of Rafico Ruiz's Slow Disturbance: Infrastructural Mediation on the Settler Colonial Resource Frontier (2021), a monograph that charts an historical account of media, mediation, and their vocation within the political economy of extractive fishery in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Atlantic Canada. Through its attention to media infrastructures—from hospitals to the cinema—and their role in reproducing both economies of extraction and modes of settler colonial belonging, Slow Disturbance, Kinder argues, offers a blueprint for an environmental media studies that might bring Marxists and "materialist media theorists" to the negotiating table.

Nataleah Hunter-Young's contribution also reviews an important recent monograph in media studies. In "Poetry from *Endless* Futures," Hunter-Young reconstructs the pathfinding itineraries of *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019), Kara Keeling's study of Afrofuturist and Black queer media practices that index and incite insurgent futures that financialized racial capitalism attempts to foreclose. Hunter-Young maps Keeling's capacious audiovisual and philosophical archive, which offers what Keeling, echoing Frantz Fanon echoing Karl Marx,





Indigenous-led movements against extractive infrastructure have brought into view the role of infrastructural media in sustaining what Jordan Kinder calls settler social reproduction.

dubs "poetry from the future." [40] Keeling draws this famous phrase from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, written in the wake of the defeat of the 1848 revolution in France.

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		etc
1		

M. NourbeSe Philip's elegiac book-length poem *Zong!*, pictured above, recomposes the words of *Gregson vs. Gilbert* (1783), the court case that ruled on behalf of the Liverpool enslavers who ordered that the captive Africans held on the slave ship *Zong* be thrown overboard in order to collect insurance on lost human property. In *Queer Times*, *Black Futures*, Kara Keeling disinters the murderous emergence of contemporary financial capitalism's modes of speculation and accumulation through the Zong massacre.

In this passage, Marx asserts that the proletarian revolution must give up its compulsion to repeat the past, to look backward to antiquity for inspiration. Marx's formulation performs a cross-temporal shuffle in its insistence that revolutionary movements draw instead from what is yet to come, from the open horizon of a future that must be grasped in the present. But even as Keeling takes from Marx (and Fanon) this imperative for revolutionary *poiesis* and invention, her close readings of director John Akomfrah of the Black Audio Film Collective also arguably lead her to set Marx's poetry to a different rhythm, one that sounds the call not to break cleanly with the past but to re-encounter it, again and anew, as "a reservoir of potential presents, futures lying in wait, now."[41] While Keeling gleans this insight from Akomfrah's experimental documentary essay *The Last Angel of History* (1996), it is also one that we find in *Handsworth Songs*, the text with which we opened this essay.

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Space Is the Place (dir. John Coney, 1972), The Aggressives (dir. Eric Daniel Peddle, 2005), Grace Jones' "Corporate Cannibal" (dir. Nick Hooker, 2008), and The Last Angel of History (dir. John Akomfrah, 1996) are discussed in Nataleah Hunter-Young's review of Queer Times, Black Futures



To conclude this introduction and to open this special section, we want to turn to a well-known moment in *Handsworth Songs* that crystallizes our dossier's approach to the project of "Revisiting Marxism and Media Studies." Midway through the film, a voice-over narration describes a fabulated conversation between a journalist and a Black woman who resides in the Handsworth neighborhood in the aftermath of the 1985 uprisings. The journalist queries the woman about the cause of the riots, seeking to create "content" for the narrative machinery of the news cycle. Her reply provides the film with its most memorable refrain:

"There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories."

Inaccessible to the camera, her words given to us only through the voice of the film's narrator, the woman and her response exceed the visual spectacle of the televised riot footage that comprises the accompanying image track. Her response refuses the terms of the telejournalist's question, his demand for an immediate and transparent cause. For the riot, the woman insists, is an inexorable echo. It is the collective reanimation of other riots, of unfinished struggles and unruly specters that always live with us. These ghosts and past struggles are present in the riot as much as the riot is a pledge of infinite responsibility to them and, so too, to the future. In the essays that follow, the authors in our dossier take heed of this woman's lesson that is echoed again and again throughout *Handsworth Songs*. Looking back at multiple histories of Marxist media theory and praxis with another eye trained on the crises of our conjuncture, these essays invite us to ask what other futures for Marxism and media studies are still yet to be invented.



Stills from *Handsworth Songs*: "There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories."

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. Stuart Hall, "Politics, Contingency, Strategy: An Interview with David Scott (1997)," in *Essential Essays, Vol. 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 249. [return to page 1]
- 2. See Stuart Hall, Chas Crister, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law & Order* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978), 394.
- 3. The "images of chains in an iron foundry," Kobena Mercer observes in his reading of *Handsworth Songs*, evoke "the connection with the chains of slavery that made the industrial revolution possible." Moreover, the juxtaposition of Manteo with familiar scenes of industrial commodity production calls into view colonial dispossession as a distinct and irreducible feature of capitalism's settler colonial imperative to transform pre-existing "noncapitalist forms of life into capitalist ones" (Coulthard 58). By placing the painting of Manteo in adjacency to the iron chains, *Handsworth Songs* less resolves differential histories of conquest, genocide, and racial slavery into a commensurate whole than marks the conditions of their mutual silencing within both bourgeois nationalist and developmentalist Marxist historiographies.

See Kobena Mercer, "Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 61; and Glen Coulthard, "From Wards of the State to Subjects of Recognition? Marx, Indigenous Peoples, and the Politics of Dispossession in Denendeh," in *Theorizing Native Studies*, eds. Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 62, emphasis in original.

- 4. Angeles T. Arredondo, "Marxism Underpins Black Lives Matter Agenda," *The Heritage Foundation*, 8 September 2021. https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/marxism-underpins-black-lives-matter-agenda.
- 5. "Levin on requiring children to wear masks at schools, teachers [sic] unions," Life, Liberty & Levin, Fox News, 1 August 2021.
- 6. See Gerald Horne, *Black & Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War*, 1944-1984 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Mary Helen Washington, *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- 7. "Remarks of President Joe Biden: State of the Union Address as Prepared for Delivery," 1 March 2022. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/01/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-

address-as-delivered/>

- 8. See, for example, the widely circulated June 2020 "Statement on Media Studies and Whiteness" authored by Arvind Rajagopal in consultation with Toby Miller in the wake of the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ccd-Ru_Z0IG94xgLrMK8w6_r8sotJ2v0aMju4vckG7I/edit? fbclid=IwAR2ewz58lNv1MwxFt7RJ i6g5Bf2x1lvKP0xSulmVxbhT0ikzQbHBFninHQY>.
- 9. See, for example, Anna Kornhbluh, *Marxist Film Theory and* Fight Club (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), as well as the essay by Matt Ellis in this issue.
- 10. Jyotsna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner, "Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Subjectivities, Publics, and New Forms of Resistance," in *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*, eds. Kapur and Wagner (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.
- 11. See Lisa Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture," *American Quarterly* 66.4 (2014): 919-941; Nick Dyer-Witheford, "Silicon," in *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (London: Pluto, 2015), 60-80; Alexander Galloway, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," in *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 78-100.

Nakamura takes as her point of departure Donna Haraway's avowedly contradictory figure of the "integrated circuit," which Nakamura reads against the unequivocal "celebration of a newly extended and enhanced cyborg body" (919) that dominated the early reception of Haraway's 1985 manifesto. See Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65-107.

Galloway's study of data visualization extends Fredric Jameson's project of cognitive mapping raised most explicitly in his essay of the same title (in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988], 347-360) but that is also taken up across Jameson's writings on the cinema. See, for example, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film," *College English* 38.8 (1977): 843-859.

12. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin, 1983), 96-106. For some influential re-readings of Marx's reflections "On the Jewish Question," see Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 24-28; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 115-124; and Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 12-18.

For some crucial engagements with the contemporary vexations of representation in film and media theory, see Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 40-44; Herman Grey, "The Feel of Life: Resonance, Race, and Representation," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1108–1119; Zach Blas, "Informatic Opacity," in *The Black Chamber: Surveillance, Paranoia, Invisibility, and the Internet,* ed. Domenico Quaranta (Brescia and Ljubljana: Link Editions/Aksioma, 2016), 41-51; and micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* (Durham, NC: Duke University

Press, 2022).

- 13. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd. edition(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 26. [return to page 2]
- 14. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I.* Trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 874. 915.
- 15. Ibid, 875.
- 16. Cedric J. Robinson, "Reality and Its Representation," in *An Anthropology of Marxism*, 2nd edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 117-124; Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004); and Glen Coulthard, "From Wards of the State."
- 17. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 12, emphasis in original.
- 18. Ibid, 13, emphasis in original.
- 19. We draw the phrase "fall away" from Neferti X.M. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 20. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "Women and the Subversion of Community," in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, eds. Selma James and Dalla Costa (Bristol, UK: Falling Wall, 1972); Angela Y. Davis, "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective," in *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1983), 222-244; Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Queering the Chain of Care Paradigm," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 6.3 (2007); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn, NY: PM Press/Common Notions, 2012); and Aren Z. Aizura, "Trans Feminine Value, Racialized Others, and the Limits of Necropolitics," in *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 129-148.
- 21. See Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2017), especially 21; and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism," *Race & Class* 40.2-3 (1998/99): 171-188.

On the National Welfare Rights Organization, see Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2005), as well as Yvonne Bramble's article in this dossier.

On the Panthers' theory and politics of social reproduction, see Nik Heynen, "Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival: The Black Panther Party's Radical Antihunger Politics of Social Reproduction and Scale," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99.2 (2009): 406-422; and Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

22. For a variety of sometimes conflicting perspectives on the meaning and scope of social reproduction, see "Social Reproduction," Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi, eds. Special issue of *Viewpoint Magazine* 5 (2015); Tithi Bhattacharya, "Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory," in Social

Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2017), 1-20; and Marina Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland, "(Un)Making Value: Reading Social Reproduction through the Question of Totality," in *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict under Capital*, eds. Kevin Floyd, Jen Hedler Phillis, and Sarika Chandra (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 67-90.

- 23. Robinson charts how capitalism, from its violent inception, preserved the principle of racialism endemic to the proto-European medieval and feudal orders. In other words, according to Robinson, capitalism did not negate feudalism and resolve its contradictions; instead, it extended and amplified the logics of racial differentiation and racial violence that had already underpinned western European social relations and consciousness. Consequently, he argues, "In contradistinction to Marx's and Engels's expectations that bourgeois society would rationalize social relations, the obverse occurred. The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology" (Black Marxism, 2). See also Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Modern U.S. Racial Capitalism: Some Theoretical Insights," Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine 72.3 (2020): 8-20; Robin D.G. Kelley, "What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?" in Race Capitalism Justice, eds. Walter Johnson with Robin D.G. Kelley (Boston: Boston Review of Books, 2017); and Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," Critical Ethnic Studies 1.1 (2015): 76-85.
- 24. Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007); Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 16-28; Seb Franklin, *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press); and Jonathan Beller, *The Message is Murder: Substrates of Informational Capitalism* (London: Pluto, 2018).
- 25. See, respectively, Brian Jefferson, *Digitize and Punish: Racial Criminalization in the Digital Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Sarah Haley, "This is Your Afterlife: Gender, Slavery, and Televisual Subjection," *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 27.1 (2017): 35-44; Erin Gray, *Laughing at Meat and Fury: A Materialist Critique of U.S. Lynching Culture.* PhD diss, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2017; Jodi A. Byrd, "Beast of America: Sovereignty and the Wildness of Objects," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117.3 (2018): 599-615; Curtis Marez, *University Babylon: Film and Race Politics on Campus* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020); and Anamik Saha, "Production Studies of Race and the Political Economy of Media," *JCMS* 60.1 (2020): 138-142.
- 26. See, prominently, Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan, "Cinema, the Post-Fordist Worker, and Immaterial Labor: From Post-Hollywood to the European Art Film," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53.1 (2012): 172-189; Elena Gorfinkel, "Weariness, Waiting: Enduration and Art Cinema's Tired Bodies," *Discourse* 34.2-3 (2012): 311-347; Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, esp. 104-106 on surplus audiences; Ewa Mazierska, ed. *Work in Cinema: Labor and the Human Condition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Barbara Mennel, *Women at Work in Twenty-First-Century European Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Sean O'Brien, "The Aesthetics of Stagnation: Ashley McKenzie's *Werewolf* and the Separated Society," *Discourse* 40.2 (2018): 208-230; Karen Pinkus, *Clocking Out: The Machinery of Life in 1960s Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); John David Rhodes, "Art Cinema's Immaterial Labors," *diacritics* 46.4 (2018): 96-116; Karl Schoonover, "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the

Queer," Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media 53.1 (2012): 65-78; Mark Steven, "Screening Insurrection: Marx, Cinema, Revolution," in After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century, eds. Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 55-70; Anna E. Ward, "Capturing the Labors of Sex Work: The Pedagogical Role of Documentary Film," in A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film, eds. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015), 191-208; and Sarah Ann Wells, "Sex Work in the Cinema: Lessons from the 1970s," A Contracorriente 16.3 (2019): 221-247. See also Johanna Isaacson's Marxist feminist horror criticism collated in the online journal Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry and the political philosopher Jason Read's film criticism on his blog Unemployed Negativity.

27. See, generally, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholtz (Oxen and New York: Routledge, 2013). This thesis was first posed as an attempt to ascertain how capital reacted to the general strikes and refusals of work in the 1960s by expanding capitalist relations beyond the sphere of industrial production, thereby presenting a formidable challenge to the Gramscian attempt to locate the relative autonomy of the political and the social. See, generally, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), and especially Virno's essay, "Do you Remember Counterrevolution?," on capital's appropriation and attempted neutralization of the Gramscian insight.

28. As Stefano Harney rightly notes, much recent scholarship on affective, reproductive, and immaterial labor owes an unpayable debt to the forms of communicative labor innovated by enslaved peoples in (and against) the plantation system of Europe's New World. In this respect, the focus in this scholarship "on educated but precariously waged, European and American workers risks staging history all over again." Harney, "Abolition and the General Intellect," *Generation Online* (2008). https://www.generation-online.org/c/fc_rent13.htm>. On the disavowal of feminist theories of reproductive labor and social reproduction within post-Autonomist (digital) studies, see Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Lisa Namakura, "The Unwanted Labour of Social Media: Women of Colour Call out Culture As Venture Community Management," new formations: a journal culture/theory/politics 86 (2015): 106-112.

28b. See, for example, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

29. See Neferti X.M. Tadiar, "Life-Times in Fate Playing," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111.4 (2012): 783-802; Tadiar, "City Everywhere," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 33.7-8 (2016): 57-83.; Roopali Mukherjee, "Bio-Work in the Blacking Factory: Police Videos and the Ethics of Seeing and Being Seen," *Black Camera* 9.2 (2018): 132-146; Andrew Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholtz (Oxen and New York: Routledge, 2013), 13-32; and Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

The phrase "organized abandonment" is drawn from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning," in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 31.

30. See The Cinema of Sara Gómez: Reframing Revolution, María Caridad

Cumaná, Susan Lord, and Víctor Fowler Calzada, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021); On the Run: Perspectives on the Cinema of Med Hondo, Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Brigitta Kuster, eds. Trans. John Barrett and Julia Schell (Berlin: Archive Books, 2020); Cynthia A. Young, Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Kay Dickenson, Arab Film and Video Manifestos: Forty-Five Years of the Moving Image Amid Revolution (London: Palgrave, 2018); and L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema, Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

- 31. Morgan Adamson, *Enduring Images: A Future History of New Left Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 19.
- 32. The list is always growing, but some notable works are: Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets!: Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2104); Angela J. Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance: Social Change and Participatory Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Chris Robé and Stephen Charbonneau, eds. *InsUrgent Media From the Front: A Media Activism Reader* (Bloomington, Indiana; Indiana University Press, 2020); ; Ryan Watson, *Radical Documentary and Global Crises: Militant Evidence in the Digital Age* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2021); and Steve Presence, Mike Wayne, and Jack Newsinger, eds. *Contemporary Radical Film Culture: Networks, Organisations, and Activists* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
- 33. As Robinson writes in *An Anthropology of Marxism*, through Marx's "conviction that all other considerations were secondary to the eventual triumph of the proletariat," "slaves and peasants [were] conceptualized as pre-capitalist forms of labor or as 'primitive accumulation' for capitalism; the self-employed [were] constructed as marginal forms; and socialism appear[ed] merely as an opposition to capitalism. Having no independent or autonomous being outside of capitalism's hegemony, they warrant only the archaeological gaze" (118).

This argument also resonates with more recent insights from scholars such as Shona N. Jackson, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Lisa Lowe, who crucially contend that to subsume racial slavery and settler colonialism under the Marxist conceptual rubrics of "labor" and "exploitation" both "reduces slavery to an economic regime, and elides [I]ndigenous peoples for whom labor exploitation was not the primary mode of colonial encounter." Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2015), 159. See also Jackson, "Humanity beyond the Regime of Labor: Antiblackness, Indigeneity, and the Legacies of Colonialism in the Caribbean," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* (2014). https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/06/humanity-beyond-the-regime-of-labor-antiblackness-indigeneity-and-the-legacies-of-colonialism-in-the-caribbean/; and Hartman's account of how "the category of labor insufficiently accounts for slavery as a mode of power, domination, and production" in "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18.2 (2016): 168.

- 34. Robinson, An Anthropology of Marxism, 120.
- 35. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, "Introduction," in *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto, 2021), 6.
- 36. Cedric J. Robinson, Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film Before World War II (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), xv.

37. Ibid, 269.

- 38. Walter Benjamin, "Convolute N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 463. [return to page 3]
- 39. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books in association with the New Left Review, 1993), 398
- 40. Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 81-85. Marx writes, "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future." See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 16; and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Marckmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 223.
- 41. Keeling, Queer Times, Black Futures, 126.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Patricio Guzmán: lessons from The Battle of Chile (1975-9)

by Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky



Man pulling rickshaw. From The Battle of Chile, Part III (Patricio Guzmán, 1979).

A few years ago, I attended a public screening and discussion of a program of four works of leftist U.S. community media. The works varied in length and commitment. They spanned about 50 years of media-making from across the country, with the earliest film from 1970—the incredible film, *Finally Got the News* (Bird, Gessner, Lichtman, Louis, Jr., Morrison, League of Revolutionary Black Workers) about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers which led a multiracial, militant labor organization in Detroit.

The screening, which was held at my university at the time, was well attended with a mix of university-affiliated spectators and an unaffiliated public. The post screening q&a with the program's organizers was polite and orderly. The standard process questions were posed (by me; I was the moderator): how did the project start? Who was involved? How did you find the material? How did you research it? The standard congratulations were issued. The program was unquestionably an achievement, though the programmer directed the attention away from their own labor and that of their collaborator, and instead emphasized the utility of the media; their context within particular labor struggles; and the importance of the ethnographic and archival labor of excavating networks of relations, biographies of producers, funding models, etc. This labor was contrasted to the dominant form of academic film scholarship, comparatively uncomplicated—namely, textual

approaches—readings, analyses, armchair opining, etc. Her gentle critique resonated; and it may be an important corrective.

But, the room—the theater where the screening was held—told a parallel story. Despite almost obligatory protestations of relevance and timeliness, the room was strikingly placid. A great work of radical filmmaking—*Finally Got the News*—emerged as a relic; interesting only for asking historical questions about political organizing of the past or for sharing stories of the days when another world seemed possible. Far from seeming vital, the films seemed like finished business, even if they were objects of resigned admiration.

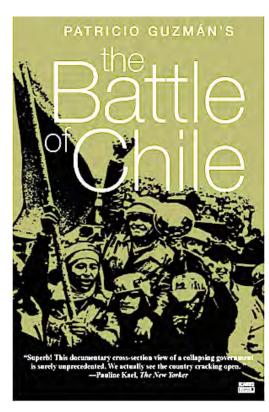
Although I had done my part to contribute to the staid, reserved atmosphere, I wondered whether this room—its feel, its vibe—provided the best justification for a textual approach. What if someone in the audienc, e rather than nostalgically praising *Finally Got the News*, had argued with it? What if someone had raised the question clearly posed by the film—of whether race-based organizing is good political strategy and under what circumstances?

In my imagination I had unfolded an alternative scenario: one in which there was an actual debate, in which people disagreed, in which some argued that the film—paradoxically—made the best case for Bernie Sanders' leadership while others argued that it clearly showed that people of color cannot organize with whites. Of course such a debate would have been a debate about how to *interpret* the film, about its meaning—and not about its place in a carefully and responsibly plotted historical mediascape.

After the event I began to wonder—at a more meta level—whether political works belonging to a distant historical moment can be enlivened in the present and under what circumstances? Is re-enlivening even a desired mode of engagement with historical works? Is it desirable for political ends (clearly part of the interest of the organizers of the program) and/or for scholarly ends? Are only *certain* works at *certain* times available for re-enlivening? Are some political works unavailable for re-enlivening because their time has actually passed and thus they are only available for scholastic and historical excavations? What method(s) are most conducive to re-enlivening?

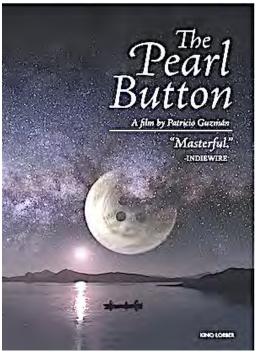
What follows here is an experiment in re-enlivening an eclipsed work of socialist cinema. My approach is surely some variety of formalism, though not the usual kind of theoretical formalism associated with Marxist film theories, the sort associated with symptomatic or ideological critique. Rather, this will be an experiment in a film criticism—albeit a theoretically-interested film criticism. Film criticism—as I will practice it here (there are surely several varieties of it)—begins with an object (a particular film in this case) and tries, through a close and precise attention to its particularities, to reveal—not for an especially specialist or insider readership—how it works, how it is structured. In practicing this inductive approach, my hope is, first, to better understand a difficult film; second, to broach larger questions about film form certainly; but, perhaps more importantly for a Marxist practice, I hope this approach, this work of film criticism, inspires a debate about political organizing and strategy in general (the subject of the film, in my reading), one that would not have been likely without the work of interpretation.

Among the films about large-scale social change, there are few more significant than Patricio Guzmán's three-part documentary, *La Batalla de Chile: La lucha de un pueblo sin armas/ The Battle of Chile: The Struggle of a People Without Arms.* This essay is about that film on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the coup that first brought General Pinochet to power. It is particularly fitting that it is



Icarus Films releaseS all three parts of *The Battle of Chile* in 1998 on DVD.





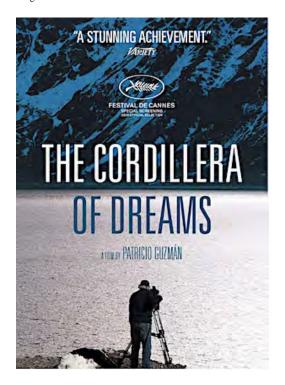
appearing in *Jump Cut* considering the journal's long history of publishing on *The Battle of Chile*, beginning with Julianne Burton's first preview of the film in her 1975 dispatch from the Pesaro festival of International New Cinema. *Jump Cut* went on to publish the first serious political treatment of the film in English by Victor Wallis in the November 1979 issue, which also featured a contextualization of the film by the Angry Arts Collective. Zuzana Pick has written about the film in the pages of *Jump Cut*, and recently, in 2010, Victor Wallis returned to *The Battle of Chile* on the occasion of Icarus Films' release, on DVD, of a special 4-disc edition that includes all three parts of the film.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Culled from approximately twenty hours of verité footage of mass street demonstrations and so-called man-on-the-street interviews, [2] and overlaid with a retrospective authoritative voice-of-god narration, *The Battle of Chile* chronicles —over its 262 minutes—the unfolding of the 1973 coup that overthrew the democratically-elected socialist President of Chile, Salvador Allende, and installed General Augusto Pinochet at the helm of a military government that would rule Chile for over 20 years. The film was put together—from exile in Cuba between 1975 and 1979—by Guzmán collaborating with some key intellectuals including the Chilean filmmaker associated with Chilean New Cinema, Pedro Chaskel; the Spanish economist, José Bartolomé; the Cuban filmmaker and theorist, Julio García Espinosa; the Chilean filmmaker, Federico Elton; Chilean political theorist Marta Harnecker; and the French filmmaker, Chris Marker.

The first part, "The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie" (1975), and the second part, "The Coup d'Etat" (1976), track the events from about March 1973 to the coup, which took place on September 11, 1973. Part I covers the period just before the parliamentary elections of March 4th and leading up to an aborted coup, called the "tanquetazo," on June 29, 1973. The *tanquetazo* killed 22 people, including an Argentine cameraman, Leonard Hendrickson, whose footage, which captures his own death, both ends Part I and begins Part II. The attempted coup of June—which was authored by the fascist, CIA-backed "Fatherland and Freedom" movement—fails when most of the military refuses to go along. Part II takes the viewer from the failed attempt in June 1973 to the bombing of La Moneda palace in September and the death of Allende inside. Part III, "The Power of the People" (1979), takes up a thread introduced in Parts I and II and amplifies it, focusing on the attempts of ordinary people—workers, peasants, housewives, etc.—to organize themselves against the coordinated efforts of Allende's enemies to reverse the course of the revolution.

Over the years, this long-recognized masterwork of political filmmaking has been eclipsed—in public and academic spheres—by Guzmán's recent poetic-philosophical memory films such as *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), *The Pearl Button* (2015), *The Cordillera of Dreams* (2019).[3] The consensus seems to be that, whereas the later films stand as genuine works of art, "*La Batalla de Chile* is very much a film of its time," as the scholar María Luisa Ortega recently put it.[4] Several ideas are at work in this assessment:

- first, that *The Battle of Chile* belongs to a tradition of dated leftist agitational filmmaking—which includes paradigmatically the 1968 Peronist film *La hora de los hornos* (Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino)—whose politics and polemical methods today appear crude and even naïve;
- second, that it employs what Bill Nichols has called a "historical rhetoric" that "examines the past and asks what really happened" as opposed to, say, a "deliberative rhetoric" that "proposes what to do";[5] and
- third, that the purported objectivity of its cinema verité techniques have been superseded by explicitly subjective techniques like first-person narration, stylized re-enactments, and enigmatic narrative foci.



Patricio Guzmán's cosmo trilogy: Nostalgia for the Light (2010), The Pearl Button (2015), The Cordillera of Dreams (2019).





While it is surely true that *The Battle of Chile* tries to establish what really happened in one of the major episodes of twentieth-century socialism, the film is more than just an archival document or a memory film, an agitational spark or a landmark in the *history* of the development of documentary forms like cinema verité. It is the formal originality of *The Battle of Chile* that I want to explore here.

Despite the specificity of its subject matter (the 1973 coup), despite the partisanship of its crew (they were staunchly on the side of Allende), despite even the seeming straightforwardness of its cinematic tools (the voice-of-god narration and verité camerawork), the film is as much about a *method* of analyzing *contemporary* events as it is about a particular time, place, or politics.[6] Unlike other leftist films of the period, it does not make a case *for* socialism *against* capitalism and imperialism; it functions, rather, as a kind of training film, apt for *cultivating* strategic thinking about where political power resides and how to exercise it. In other words, *The Battle of Chile* is best understood as a primer on how to make change happen, a way of modeling how to act in times of social and political transformation.

It is aided in this modeling project by the unusual historical circumstances in which an avowed socialist like Allende, who was explicitly planning a "democratic road to socialism," holds the Executive. It is fair to say that most filmic representations of mass street-based movements pit the "unwashed," exploited masses—the people, characteristically pictured as crowds of demonstrators—against the repressive state (either unpictured or figured as a male tyrant). Sergei Eisenstein is famous for this, as is Gillo Pontecorvo. So, too, in different ways, are the films of the Workers Film and Photo League from the 1930s.

The archive of images of street protest largely belongs to the iconography of the left. That is, moving images of protesting crowds have generally functioned as the visual synecdoche for "the people"; and it is thought that "the people"—as a notion, as an expression of popular sovereignty—only makes sense, in Judith Butler's formulation, in its "perpetual act of separating [itself] from state sovereignty."[7] In *The Battle of Chile*, by contrast, the state and *the people* (a phrase present in the film's subtitle—"la lucha de un pueblo [a people] sin armas") are on the same side, and they are, moreover, opposed by *other people*, who are also assembling in the street as protesting crowds.

This means that there are street crowds comprised of ordinary people on both sides of the political divide; and both groups are claiming the mantle of "the people." That it is the right—the Opposition, which is a substantial and a somewhat diverse coalition—occupying the more standard position of opposing state power creates a recurring sense of disorientation in the film as the familiar coordinates (e.g. left=the people/the protesters/the aggrieved/the righteous and right = the state)—and familiar largely thanks to media—are jumbled. Indeed, Guzmán's great challenge is to chronicle a confusing political landscape where a battle is waged between different social forces—parties, unions, boss's



Politically left demonstrators challenging the state. [Top] From *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925); [Middle] From *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966); [Bottom] From *Hunger: The National March to Washington, 1932* (Workers Film and Photo League, 1933).



An example of typage in *Strike* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925): The "stockholder" rejecting the workers' demands.

organizations, neighborhood associations, student groups, etc.—a battle that divides people politically but not, or at least not self-evidently, in social or class terms.

To meet this challenge, or so I will argue, Guzmán's film conjures a paradigm of the historical materialist method as applied to a prior revolution, with its own famous "June Days," Karl Marx's 1852 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. The Eighteenth Brumaire* is about the failure of revolution and the rise of a single figure in charge of the state. Perhaps the most famous line in Marx's text is about historical repetition. Marx acknowledges the truth of the old adage that history repeats itself, but insists that the adage fails to register a crucially important dimension of this phenomenon: that in repeating itself history changes modes or genres. The first time as tragedy, he famously wrote; the second time as farce. On this basis, Marx develops a method that relates the phases of the 1848 revolution to the phases of the 1789 revolution (itself an event in which performers were the garb of the Roman republic).

The Battle of Chile is another repetition of this cycle, but in its adaptation of Marx's method to the medium of cinema, the film raises basic formal questions specific to the problem of the *representation* of social change on film. Most notably: how does film, and this film in particular, visualize—or concretize or materialize—the abstract notion of a social force? This question has, of course, been broached in other films—including Sergei Eisenstein's fictionalized historical films such as Battleship Potemkin (1925). Strike (1925), and October: Ten Days that Shook the World (1928). But the problem of filming a social force takes on a peculiar shape in a cinema verité documentary mode where the "raw material" is footage of actual events. It takes on a peculiar shape where the allegorization achieved by Eisenstein partly through his deployment of typage in which he casts certain non-actors in particular roles based on the extent to which their physical attributes conform to widely-held, pre-existing stereotypes of the social identity they are representing (the anti-realist idea being that one's physical characteristics and one's social identity are not naturally correlated)—must therefore contend with the specificity of each and every person-on-the-street who is interviewed.[8]

Not least for this reason, Guzmán's person-on-the-street tends to be representative of a collective subject or subject position. That is, each particular person interviewed stands-in for a social force; and, in some sense, each interviewee's role is to ventriloquize the self-understanding of the group to which they belong. Yet at the same time, each person also resists representativeness; each is, in some basic sense, irreducible to a broader collective. The spontaneity of cinema verité's method (which is unlike Eisenstein's practice of typage) and the ontology of the medium conspire to deliver singularity—that person; that voice; that syntax; those words; that way of talking and walking and head-cocking; that unique life, unlike any other. Each social actor is unavoidably singular, even if they function in the film as representatives. Of course that social actor's singularity, uniqueness, nonfungibility—which is medium-specific—must, to some extent, pull against or unsettle the smooth unanimity of the collective voice. The reliance on person-on-the-street interviews must ultimately constrain the allegorizing impulses of a social force film like *The Battle of Chile*.

Die Nevolution,
Gine Zeitschrift in zwanglosen Heften.

Genausgegeben von

I. Wendemener.

Grites Heft.

Der 18te Prumaire des Louis Napoleon
von
Rarl Warg.

The Eighteenth Brumaire was first published, in 1852 in *Die Revolution*, a German monthly magazine based in New York.

De in : Porf.
Erzelitien: Deutiche Bereint-Buchtantieng von Schnift und Belmichmitten . 2mm Rr. 191.
1852. My re-reading of *The Battle of Chile*, then, will come to focus on the tension that the person-on-the-street interview generates within the project of the representation of large-scale social change. This device that is so prominent in Guzmán's film, and which has no correlate in Marx's written pamphlet, is both central to the film's democratic and humanist ethos but is also a potential destabilizer for its more general and ambitious aspiration to narrate a story (without heroes) about the battle of social forces. *The Battle of Chile* ultimately turns this tension into its greatest achievement.

Now-time

Why connect *The Battle of Chile* with *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in the first place? Part of the answer, as I have already intimated, lies in the film's conspicuous work in staging questions of historical repetition and changing registers of performance. First published in *Die Revolution*, a German monthly magazine based in New York, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* begins in February 1848, when a bourgeois revolution unseated the then republican monarch, King Louis Phillipe, and concentrated power in a constituent assembly that drafted a new constitution. It ends in December 1851, when the freely elected president, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, dissolved the parliament and set himself up as emperor of France, in a marked repetition of the dissolution of the 1789 Revolution in the first Napoleon's coup. The account was written retrospectively, several months after the fact, though it narrates the recent events almost exclusively in the present tense.

The Eighteenth Brumaire is not primarily a work of history, so much as it uses a historical case study as an exposé of unseen levers of power. True, the work narrates how a particular history unfolded, taking into account the actions, often inadvertent, of various groups. These groups include not merely classes or quasiclasses—the peasantry, the proletariat, large landholders, the aristocracy of finance—but also political forces that were sometimes coextensive with particular classes and sometimes divided among them. Such is the case with the bourgeoisie, on the very cusp of the coup. Parliamentary and literary representatives of this class were against Bonaparte, but its extra-parliamentary members were mostly with him. Marx writes of the

"most motley mixture of crying contradictions: constitutionalists who conspire openly against the constitution; revolutionaries who are confessedly constitutional; a national assembly which wants to be all-powerful and still remains parliamentary, etc." [9]

In one of his frequent recourses to poetic language and literary history, he concludes.

"Men and events appear as Schlemiels in reverse, as shadows that have

lost their bodies. The revolution has paralysed its own proponents and has endowed only its enemies with passion and violence. The counter-revolutionaries continually summon, exorcise, and banish the 'red spectre', and when it finally appears, it is not in the phrygian cap of anarchy but in the uniform of order, in [the soldier's] red breeches."[10]

The point of Marx's description here is that things are not as they appear; classes and subclasses and various other constituencies are not behaving as one (even Marx) would expect or predict. Shadows that have lost their bodies are like effects without causes. The work of the *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, though, is not to give up on explanation and declare the actions of men irrational; rather, it is to investigate hidden, hard to discern causes.

Seen from a certain perspective, there are clear parallels—historical as well as methodological between Marx's work and Guzmán's. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* opens in 1848 with a revolution that creates the French Second Republic and ends with a coup d'etat three years later that installs Louis Napoléon Bonaparte as Emperor of France from 1852-1870. Similarly, in *The Battle of Chile* the story begins with the 1970 election of Salvador Allende, who promises a peaceful transition to socialism, and ends with a coup d'etat three years later that appoints General Augusto Pinochet first as President of the Military Junta of Chile and later as President of the Republic; he rules from 1973-1990.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Beyond such parallels, striking as they are, there are deeper, and more important methodological connections between Marx and Guzmán's work. Like The Eighteenth Brumaire, the film is made after the fact, from 1975-9; so, it, too, is a near-term retrospective, set off from the events by only a short time. As with *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, the end—the coup—introduces the film and haunts every moment of it. The "players" are also social, and mainly, political forces: Allende's Popular Unity coalition; the so-called Opposition, with its own coalition of center, center-right, right-wing, and extreme right parties; the military, whose class composition and class character are no straightforward matter, etc. Like The Eighteenth Brumaire, as well, the film has little political substance in a more familiar sense of doctrines and programs and polemics: it does not argue for socialism on the merits. Instead, it is about how power works—how to get it and how to lose it. Significantly, just as in The Eighteenth Brumaire, The Battle of Chile does not represent power as residing wholly with the armed forces. Rather, in both works, power moves in multiple directions and has multiple lines of force. [11] [open endnotes in new window] We learn from each, if in different ways, that power must have a base of support in the population—or, at least, those wielding the power must have neutralized (politically) large segments of the population that might have challenged that power.

Historians have long criticized Marx's method of doing history, targeting it for its alleged determinism, for its reliance on what Engels in his 1885 introduction referred to as "the great law of motion of history"—that is,

"the law according to which all historical struggles, whether they proceed in the political, religious, philosophical or some other ideological domain, are in fact only the more or less clear expression of struggles of social classes." [12]

If *The Eighteen Brumaire* has survived as a scholarly object of study into the present, it is largely because it won a new lease on life for its "literary qualities" and not for either its historical *method* or for its content. But in organizing and activist circles, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is seen as a model—a method—of how to *analyze* the *present* political conjuncture with an eye toward intervening in it. I think *The Battle of Chile* could be used similarly.

It is hard to see in these two texts about revolutionary failure any sense of hope or optimism; they are made with, and saturated by, knowledge of defeat and death. But the methods of both texts also offer up an alternate reading in the cracks of historical inevitability. What if, inspired by the example of *The Eighteenth* Brumaire, we were to read *The Battle of Chile* not principally as a historiographic document, nor even as offering a method of making historical films, but rather in more prospective terms as an organizing primer, an aid in understanding, say, when and how to organize a general strike? This requires the peculiar strategy of moving backwards into moments of historical flux, when the lines of power were not solidified. "Give us guns! The Army is coming! We will defend you!" say Allende's supporters throughout Parts I and II. What if Allende had done this? We wonder about the counterfactuals that emerge in watching *The Battle of Chile*. The exercise of popular power requires strategic thinking about the push and pull of social and political forces. It requires constant re-orientation to counter the disorientation(s) of living in the present, to counter the way that the underlying dynamics of politics may not appear to people so clearly.













The first six shots of the trilogy: The bombing of La Moneda Palace on September 11, 1973. From *The Battle of Chile, Part I* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975).

This is not a problem unique to Guzmán's time, or to Marx's; it lives with us still. Many people who were not alive yet or too young at the time would like to believe that if they lived during the era of the Civil Rights Movement, they would have joined the movement; that they would have believed that change was possible and imminent; that, with some work, the balance of power could be shifted, that the time was ripe. But, of course, in most cases that is false. The difficulty of living in history is that, in the present, one does not have the retrospective clarity characteristic of looking back on events long past.

This difficulty is marked in the recent political slogan, "Never Again is Now," which emerged in organizing against Trump's U.S. immigrant detention camps. [13] The phrase "never again" refers to the Holocaust; it affirms a commitment to act sooner rather than later in the face of a new fascist threat. To dub the detention camps concentration camps and to propose that now is the time when the fascist threat is upon us is, I think, an attempt (some would say an overblown attempt) to counter the disorientation of being in the unfolding of history. If the balance of social forces were transparent, if appearances could be trusted, we would not need such a shorthand that attempts—in four words—to lift us out of the disorienting flow of the present and give us the "Now" anew. *The Battle of Chile* aims at this problem exactly, though it takes far more than four words to make its point.

Mechanics of historical change

The subject of the first two parts of *The Battle of Chile* is how the coup became possible. We often talk loosely—perhaps as a shorthand—about coups as if the coup plotters got together in some back room, decided they had had enough of the status quo, and then—from morning to night—take state power. Perhaps even the subtitle of this film—"the struggle of a people without arms"—gives this impression, as if it was *the people*—regular people—on one side and the armed forces on the other imposing its will (as if it was the military's guns alone that was the source of its power). Might makes reality.

In *The Battle of Chile*, it is significant that the film begins with the end—with the military's bombing of La Moneda Palace on September 11th 1973. The bombing comprises the film's credit sequence, with the sounds of airplanes and explosions preceding the first image. The opening montage lasts about 50 seconds and shows the palace, in a series of six high-angle long shots, being hit by bombs and subsequently catching fire. The montage ends with a super-imposed title card, "Part I: The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie"; now the film proper will begin. This opening sets up a kind of suspense structure where we know the ultimate result: the coup. The question raised within the first few minutes is: how did the coup become possible in Chile, until then the oldest, most stable democracy in Latin America?

After the credit sequence, which is in a sense a flashforward, the film will move back in time—roughly six months—to the period of street demonstrations that took place in the build-up to the parliamentary elections of March 4, 1973. Then, it will proceed forward in time, chronologically.





Crowds on both sides. [Left] From the first post-credit sequence of Part I: Popular Unity demonstration. March 1973. [Right] Opposition demonstration, March 1973. From *The Battle of Chile, Part I* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975-79).

As it proceeds chronologically, the film will adopt a peculiar dialectical structural pattern that will alternate back and forth between segments depicting the street demonstrations of two opposed political coalitions: Popular Unity, which supports Allende; and the Opposition, which must receive more than 66% of the vote in order to realize its main objective—namely, the impeachment of Allende. The film represents each side with a combination of crowd shots and person-on-the-street interviews.[14]





Interviews with supporters of Popular Unity and with supporters of the Opposition. [Left] Popular Unity person-on-the-street; [Right] Opposition person-on-the-street. From *The Battle of Chile, Part I* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975).

The Popular Unity coalition is made up primarily of smaller political blocks including the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Radical Party, Popular Unitary Action Movement (MAPU). The Opposition is comprised primarily of the Christian Democrats (led by the former President Eduardo Frei), the National Party (led by the former president, Jorge Alessandri, and Sergio Jarpa), the Radical Democracy Party, and the Radical Left Party. The first twenty minutes of the film alternate between these political forces, giving each approximately the same amount of screen time, about seven minutes each.

Opening Minutes of The Battle of Chile, Part I: The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie

Credits: Bombing of La Moneda Palace (September 1973)

Popular Unity Demonstrations (March 1973; pre-election): 0:1:46-0:7:19

- crowds
- man-on-the-street interviews

Opposition Demonstrations (March 1973; pre-election): 0:7:20—0:10:36

man-on-the-street interviews

Popular Unity (March 1973; pre-election): 10:37-12:00

man-on-the-street interviews

Opposition (March 4th, 1973; election day): 0:13:00-0:14:42; 15:20-18:20

- crowds
- · interview with bourgeois lady in her apartment-
- car on the street interviews with celebrants of (what they thought was an) opposition victory.
 18:20

Parliamentary Chamber

Popular Unity screen time: ~7 mins; Opposition screen time: ~7 mins

Structure of the first 20 minutes of Part I. Screen time equally divided between Popular Unity and the Opposition.

While at this point the pattern is dialectical and thus treats the two opposing political forces as coherent entities, of course there are internal disagreements between the parties that comprise each coalition. Those political differences come to take on special importance in the case of Popular Unity, first, because the internal conflicts (between the 'reformist' wing and the 'revolutionary' wing) that intensify in 1972 put pressure on Allende's state, and second, because the conflicts reflect an argument about strategy and tactics whose resolution overdetermines the course of events. [15] These conflicts will be taken up in more detail below.

Part of what is so striking in this opening is the film's representational symmetry in the presentation of both sides: each has its crowds; each has its individuals, though they are not spokespeople or leaders, for the most part. Depicting politicized masses as marching crowds making demands on the state is a familiar cinematic trope, but these crowds are usually comprised of left political elements protesting *the state*, making demands of the state, registering their disapproval of the state. In *The Battle of Chile*, there are crowds and there are ordinary people on both sides of the political conflict. But although the screen time is roughly evenly divided between the sides in the first 20 minutes, the *emphasis* is not. The interviews with the supporters of the Opposition are of special significance here.

Guzmán asks individual Opposition demonstrators: "What is your position on the elections of this Sunday? What do you think about the future? Do you believe in the electoral road or in another road? The four people to which he puts the last question, do not hesitate: the electoral road always, they affirm confidently, despite their evident disgust with "those dirty communists," as one demonstrator puts it.







From four of the seven person-on-the-street interviews with Opposition marchers. Among the questions the interviewer asks in these four interviews is: "Do you believe in the electoral road or in another road?" From *The Battle of Chile, Part I* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975).

This sets up the film's basic problematic: How did it come to pass that the average (largely middle class) citizen supporters of the Opposition came to accept the coup? Despite the film's seemingly partisan tilt, this is the real question that frames the first two parts of *The Battle of Chile*. The film—in these first two parts—will try to account for how this sector of the population abandoned its basic commitment to democratic norms as a consequence of the events on the ground. [16] Those events, it is suggested, shifted their consciousness and allowed them to justify—to themselves—the necessity of the coup. These first two parts are, in effect, the story of how the coup was legitimated; this is a story about politics, not about brute strength.

The Battle of Chile's framing political question is close to the one that frames *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: Marx writes,

"It is not enough to say as the French do, that their nation has been taken unawares. A nation like a woman is not forgiven the unguarded hour in which the first rake that tries can take her by force. The riddle will not be solved by mere phrases that merely state it in other terms. What needs to be explained is *how a nation of 36 million can be taken unawares* by three common con-men [Louis Bonaparte, the duc de Morny his half-brother, and the minister of Justice Rouher] and marched off unresisting into captivity." [17]

The March parliamentary elections gave the Popular Unity coalition 43% of the vote, which denied the Opposition the 2/3 (66%) majority it needed to impeach Allende. The voice-over narration announces that with this electoral defeat the electoral phase comes to an end, and the strategy of the coup begins to take shape.











The five chapters titles from The Battle of Chile, Part I (Patricio Guzmán, 1975).

That strategy has five planks, all numbered in text on screen: 1) Hoarding and the Black Market; 2) Parliamentary Boycott; 3) Student Disturbances; 4) The Offensive by Employer's Organizations; 5) Copper Strike. These episodes will frame the heart of Part I. Each strategy of the Opposition sows confusion and instability, and aims at winning another layer of the population to the Opposition's side. In this sense, the strategies are oriented toward impacting the "optics," and thus mobilizing and de-mobilizing certain sectors of the population. For each strategy of the Opposition, the film reveals the gap between how things appear and the underlying forces at work.

For example, in the first strategy, "Hoarding and the Black Market," business interests and small shopkeepers, angry with the government for implementing price controls and restrictions on exports, began hoarding goods in warehouses where the goods were allowed to rot and/or selling the goods on the black market.





[Left] Hoading. [Right] A volunteer organizing rationing. From *The Battle of Chile, Part I* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975).

The intention was to empty store shelves of products, thus producing shortages. The optic of empty store shelves has long been employed to discredit mostly leftist governments.[18] The calculation in the Chilean case was that this would shift popular opinion as it would demonstrate that, practically, Allende's government could not meet the needs of the population. In response to the hoarding, supporters of the government—with the assistance of a government minister assigned to help with coordination—organized themselves into neighborhood-based local councils for provisions and prices (JAPS) comprised of workers, housewives, residents, etc. They took possession of hoarded goods when they could and organized the distribution of provisions (including those produced by nationally-owned food producers), selling them at cost.

In the case of the fourth strategy ("The Offensive by Employer's Organizations"), employer organization leaders escalate their rhetoric against the state and begin to organize stoppages and boycotts designed to hobble production in state-owned and state-run factories. The employer organizations justify their actions by citing government failure to resolve problems around pricing, tariffs, and spare parts shortages. In a particularly illustrative sequence, a leader in the National Confederation of Owners of Taxibuses and Autobuses addresses a huge



A leader in the National Confederation of Owners of Taxibuses and Autobuses addresses a conference crowd.



Conference banner.



convention crowd from a stage. His total conviction and his language—which coopts familiar terms and phrases of leftist political discourse and is captured by *The Battle of Chile* in close-ups—make his speech surprisingly compelling, and thus disorienting. Listen to him:

"We can't keep on patching and mending and wearing ourselves out," he says. "The vehicles have gotten old and the bent back of many of the owners have grown old too! Generations of them! It's a matter of filling the pots, of surviving, of holding out, of being able to save this sector, because with that we are saving the jobs of millions of people who have faith and confidence in this working man, in this ill-treated transporter. He is the person who is actually building Chile! He is the true revolutionary! Who can deny that the moment has come for the entire transport sector—without distinction, fighting on one platform—to propose this national stoppage!"

In effect, he is arguing for the work stoppage of the transport sector on the same grounds that people typically argue for workers' strikes (i.e. it is a matter of putting food on the table and, anyway, the *transportistas* actually add value to the society). Rather than rejecting outright Allende's revolutionary, transformative project, the speaker happily claims the radical mantle, re-signifying the left's rhetoric and remaking small business owners into hard-working, beleaguered, under-appreciated victims of an inept and oppressive government.

Within each of these episodes, *The Battle of Chile* will build a cause-effect chain by oscillating back and forth between the destabilizing assaults of the Opposition and the responses and counter-attacks of Popular Unity. Judging from the structure of the film, the fifth and most significant of the strategies pursued by the Opposition is the strategy of the "Copper Strike." I would like to focus on this episode because it constitutes a particularly stark example of how the film invites a certain kind of disorientation as a form of training in strategic thinking.

Copper strike

In the fifth strategy of the coup, "Copper Strike," the copper miners at the nationalized El Teniente copper mine go on strike for economic reasons. The voice-over narration that begins the episode explains that the strike advances the interests and agenda of the Opposition (even if the striking workers are not actively seeking this outcome): "For the first time, the Opposition wins over a sector of the proletariat. In the El Teniente mine, a group of workers go on strike for economic reasons. Traditionally well paid, the copper miners are the aristocracy of Chile's workers. For the Opposition, the aim of the conflict is to paralyze the mine. 20% of Chile's earnings are produced here." The camera surveys the energetic crowd of striking workers chanting a variation on the familiar slogans from Popular Unity demonstrations including "El pueblo, unido, jámas será vencido. [The people, united, will be never be defeated]." Reprising that cry, these strikers chant: "Teniente, unido, jámas será vencido. [Teniente mine, united, will never be defeated." When the leader of a faction of the workers in support of the Popular Unity government proposes that all the strikers return to work, he is met with the chant: "Politics no! Politics no!" The implication is that the strikers are striking as workers, independent of the state; they are holding the state—regardless of its stated commitments to their interests—accountable for promises that have yet to materialize.





The beginning [top] and end [middle] of a minutelong, hand-held, 360 degree shot that opens the "Copper Strike" episode: [bottom] At a packed stadium a Popular Unity leader is booed by the crowd: "Politics, no!" they chant. From *The Battle* of Chile, Part I (Patricio Guzmán, 1975).

This sequence is deeply disorienting, and in a way that is characteristic of the structure of Part I. While the film's voice-of-god narration proposes that the striking workers are privileged antagonists, hastening the demise of Allende, assisting in the coup—the crowd that we are seeing on the image track, in effect, declares itself to be the people. It wants to be heard. It wants what the socialist government promised. From a certain point of view, it might seem that the strikers are pressuring the state from the left, and refusing Popular Unity's nationalist appeals for unity against first-world interventionism. Who can side against these legitimate strikers? They are bona fide workers, after all. And the force of their protest is palpable. The film has put the spectator in an awkward position. All the iconicity of this crowd—everything commonly associated with the strike, with the dignity of labor, with the legitimacy of withholding it, with the tyranny of the state, with the righteousness of organized worker masses—all of this must be reassessed in light of the narration. Word versus image. Instruction versus spectacle. Things are not as they seem. Or, to put it in the terms of *The* Eighteenth Brumaire,

"Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they appear to be revolutionising themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, and uniforms in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honoured disguise and with this borrowed language." [19]

Marx's insight applies as much to strikers who reach for the favored chants of Popular Unity, as it does to Guzmán himself, who has no choice but to borrow from cinema's repository of revolutionary imagery and try to re-signify its meaning.

But we can go deeper: how to characterize here the relationship between the introductory voice-over narration and the synchronous images? In some sense, the verité images *illustrate* the narration: The strikers are allowing themselves to be used by the Opposition. The images certainly do not contradict the voice-over narration; this is not a case of counterpoint. And yet, the rhetorical force of the images is undeniable. By *presenting* them—by showing us energized, disciplined, striking workers that are so similar to images from across the history of left political filmmaking—the film "infects" us a bit with this disorientation, and thus inoculates us. If the choice of material were more stark, melodramatic, Manichean, caricatured—i.e. if the crowd were less convincing, if the speaking organizers of the strike seemed more cynical or less earnest—the sequence could not invite disorientation because it would be clear to the viewer that the strikers are enemies and their movement astroturfed. But the disorientation of the sequence as it has been filmed and edited invites the exercise of strategic thinking.

The film forces one to think hard about the significance of the copper strike within a broader context. The strike has been delinked from the standard contexts in which it is encountered (i.e. the fight with a capitalist boss). The viewer cannot fall back on the familiar tropes. Actually, she can now see the strike as a tactic. By itself, the strike has no pre-determined political affiliation with leftist politics: it can be wielded by the political right just as well as by the political left. One must think strategically on a case-by-case basis. What is the meaning of a strike in the *unusual* case in which socialists control the executive branch? What sort of strategy is this strike? What kind of pressure does it exert? How and on whom? How can its effects be neutralized without losing the support of its participants or its sympathizers?

A few minutes later, in one of the most striking person-on-the-street interviews of the film, an interviewed striker himself displays an emblematic disorientation. The sequence begins with two street-level shots of a crowd of hyped-up strikers marching through the streets. From off-screen, an interviewer asks a first demonstrator, "why are you striking?" He responds matter of factly, "We're demanding the 41% that the [state owned] company owes us." "How many days have you been on strike?" the interviewer follows up. "It's been 21 days now." "What's going to happen?" "It will have to be settled today or tomorrow," he replies.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Interview with striking worker.



Detail of his clasped hands.

After this set-up, the film cuts to a different person-on-the-street interview. The off-screen interviewer resumes where he left off: "Is this a union movement or a political movement?" A well-dressed striker in his white collared shirt and suit jacket replies in a distinctly unrefined Spanish, "It's never had anything to do with politics because there's never been a politician or legislator or senator involved in this. Because the workers are defending our own rights. And I think we have to win because we elected our President so that he would defend the worker's rights, not so that he'd come and criticize us when we ask for something. It isn't just." "Are you with the President?" the interviewer asks, trying to clarify matters. "Yes, I am with the President." "But this strike is damaging the government," the interviewer presses. "Of course it's damaging, but I think that in all these 21 days of striking, they should at least have settled the strike."

These interviews take place more than an hour into the 90-minute film. The first interview is factual. It is just what one would expect. He basically says: The government hasn't paid us; we want our money. But the second interview takes up the thread of the stadium rally. Without the film's guiding voice-over narration and its structural conceit, I think I would hear this worker differently. But after 60 minutes, the film has primed me, trained me. The worker stammers. At one point, the camera tilts down to reveal the striker's clasped hands. He's nervous, perhaps he is unaccustomed to being filmed, to being interviewed, to being asked to deliver his own political analysis. This strike is not political, he affirms. At no point has a politician or a senator or a government representative been involved with this or directed anyone's actions, he says. He is a worker defending his rights. His choice to strike is a free choice. In fact, he supports Allende. He is his own man. Here he is speaking in his own voice, for himself. No one directs him.

But, of course, the film has tried to show that being directed is not always so plain as literally being told what to do or say. Moreover, directing events is not so straightforward as plotting secretly in some backroom. Despite his protestations, the worker is acting against his interests—the film suggests. At an earlier historical moment, one might have said that he exhibits false consciousness.[20] [open endnotes in new window] What the man is blind to—the film suggests—is his place, his role, in the battle of powerful underlying forces. The film has put the viewer in the position of seeing his blindness, even as one can also sympathize with him and perceive how he might find himself holding such a view. I can put this differently: the film shows that the man is missing a cognitive map, to use Fredric Jameson's coinage. What the times make difficult is to perceive, as Jameson writes.

"the contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience." [21]

The interviews give us a kind of access to that phenomenological experience while the film as a whole—its structure, its narration—gives us the structure of things. Together, they prompt us to map the relation of the particular to the general, experience to structure.

Like the crowd from the earlier stadium sequence, and like the speaker at the National Confederation of Owners of Taxibuses and Autobuses conference, the worker is compelling. We do not dislike him; he seems genuine, not cynical. We understand why things might look this way to him; without the film's narration, they might look that way to us. If the person-on-the-street interviews, if the shots of crowds striking and protesting, if the scene of an auditorium of university students chanting in support of the strike "workers and students, forward together" (in an upside down reprise of the slogans of May 1968)—if these sequences are all disorienting by countering certain unacknowledged associations, and thus by exerting pressure on the viewer's loyalties, the voice-over narration can be depended on to steady us. But in the gulf that opens between the narration and the disorienting scene, we are prompted to reconcile appearances and (invisible) political dynamics. In that space, strategic thinking comes into play. The spectator inevitably strives to understand *how* the underlying forces could produce such beguiling optics—or, stated differently, how such beguiling optics could hide such a contrasting reality. Of course, if this reading is compelling, it raises fundamental questions about cinema verité as a convincing representational strategy and about the evidentiary status of the person-on-thestreet testimony.

The person-on-the-street

The example I have been describing exhibits a tension at the core of the film's deployment of person-on-the-street interviews. On the one hand, the film gives a very prominent role to the words of anonymous workers, peasants, supporters of the Popular Unity government who are active in organizing themselves in their neighborhoods and in their workplaces. Indeed, if the film has some political content it is a commitment to direct democracy, to the basic intelligence and capacity of regular people—of *the people*—to run their own neighborhoods, to run the factories, to run the state, to run the world—cooperatively—maybe even without leaders. And, above all, to speak for themselves. The incredibly high-level and evident political sophistication of the self-expression of the women and men on the street and in the recorded organizing meetings, especially in Part II, has been—I think—rarely paralleled in the history of nonfiction cinema.

On the other hand, in this case of the striking worker, self-expression is a problem —not because the striker is bad or cynical. But, because he is disoriented, because he is shortsighted; he is not thinking analytically about contemporary events. In this case—and this is just one example of many from Part I—the narration has undermined the credibility and reliability of the worker's self-expression.

The person-on-the-street interview has no parallel in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. That a social force would be imagined as a marching crowd in film is not so surprising perhaps. But that a film largely about the battle of social and political forces should rely so insistently on the close-up testimony of anonymous individuals *is* surprising. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is premised on the insight that things are not as they appear, that there is a divorce between the explicit discourse of groups and the courses of action they pursue. The speeches of group representatives are of little utility in predicting the latter. As Marx writes,

"Just as in private life, one distinguishes between what a man thinks and says, and what he really is and does, so one must all the more in historical conflicts make the distinction between the fine words and aspirations of the parties from their real organization and their real interests, their image from their reality." [22]

But the standard ideology of the person-on-the-street interview confers authority on the person-on-the-street. To question that authority is to violate the form's democratic ethos. In our contemporary context, in which the people's self-expression is unassailable, this reading of *The Battle of Chile* must chafe.

The strength of the first part of *The Battle of Chile* rests with the tension surrounding the person-on-the-street interview. The person-on-the-street is *both*



"Chico" Mosquera, a representative of the leadership of the Central Única de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT), addressing workers belonging to the Recoleta industrial belt or *cordon*.



A crowded meeting. Workers from the Rocoleta *cordon* participating in a meeting with the CUT leadership. From *The Battle of Chile, Part II* (Patricio Guzmán, 1976).

visionary and myopic. While he is always to be believed, his *analysis* is not always right. But even when he is mistaken as in the case of the striking worker of Part I, the impact and singularity of his figure, of his voice, of its tone and timbre, of his gesture—all the unique contributions of film to his characterization—is such that he is not to be dismissed so easily. We want to see if we can account for *why* things look this way to him and *why* they are not actually that way. The film's open, curious, and compassionate approach to its social actors eschews the moralism that often attaches to epic historical battles like this one. In the place of moralism, the film invites a different kind of political thinking, one which can account for the divergence between appearance and reality. Across several examples, this move constitutes a kind of training.

The power of the people

But the film's cultivation of strategic thinking is not limited to orienting us in the conflicts between the left and the right, where the person-on-the-street errs. I will give a different kind of example, where the tension is not between the narration and the social actors but rather where it emerges from within the film's depicted world. In Part II, there is a remarkable 9.5-minute, 13-shot sequence that presents an official meeting between a delegate from the Central Única de Trabajadores de Chile/ Chilean Trades Union Congress (CUT), which was a trade union federation coordinating with Allende's government, and workers belonging to the Recoleta industrial belt or cordon. Founded in 1953, the CUT was the largest worker federation in Chile and its purpose was to bring unity to the previously dispersed worker's movement. The CUT was a multi-tendency organization; its governing board in 1970 had representatives from across the leftist party spectrum, with the strongest representation coming from the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. Cordones, on the other hand, were organizations of workers from all the factories in a given municipality; they had begun to form across the country in 1972. They were horizontally-organized and very democratic entities: leaders or delegates were elected from factory shop floors and could be changed easily; meetings of delegates from the factories were open, meaning that anyone could speak (though only delegates could vote).[23] Recoleta, which was comparatively small, brought together 30,000 workers from 51 different unions.

The almost 10-minute sequence unfolds a debate among the Recoleta *cordon* members and the delegate from the CUT—"Chico" Mosquera. The background is this: In response to the unfolding attempted coup of June 29th 1973, the CUT—imagining it to be the decisive moment for mass mobilization—had issued a call for workers to occupy their factories. The *cordones* heeded the call, and several hundred factories in Santiago alone were taken over. But after the crisis had passed and the coup had been put down, Allende again sought a conciliation with the Christian Democrats (as protection against another coup). He wanted to see the return some of the factories. The CUT soon found itself under pressure from the government; it was caught between the President and the *cordones*, which were determined to push forward.[24] While the debate is ostensibly about how to handle the spontaneous and extra-legal worker take-overs of once-privately owned factories and whether or not to nationalize them or return them, more existentially, the conflict between Mosquera and the Recoleta *cordon* workers is a conflict over key questions of socialist strategy:

- the challenges of trying to achieve socialism in one country;
- the constraints imposed by the legal road to socialism;
- the difficulties of coordinating actions across parallel worker organizations (the unions, the CUT, the *cordones*) and party leadership, etc. (i.e. the question of democratic organizational and inter-organizational structures);
- the independence and autonomy of the worker's movement—that is, independence from even a friendly state like Allende's (i.e. the instability of dual power).

The back and forth goes through not one but four rounds.





Round one of the filmed debate. [Left] "Chico" Mosquera, a delegate of the elected leadership of the Central Única de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT). [Right] An objection from the floor. From *The Battle of Chile, Part II* (Patricio Guzmán, 1976).

Round One. First the CUT delegate—implicitly trying to convince the workers to take direction from the CUT leadership—argues that not all the factories that have been taken over by workers should ultimately be nationalized (i.e. receive recognition and direction from the state). There is the matter that some of those factories are unprofitable and so would represent dead weight for the state. The floor resists: fine, but once we've taken-over these factories, we need some kind of decision from the CUT about what to do with them.







Round two of the filmed debate. [Left] "Chico" Mosquera, an elected representative of the Central Única de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT). [Middle and Right] Two objections from the floor. From *The Battle of Chile, Part II* (Patricio Guzmán, 1976).

Round Two. Mosquera then gets to the real issue: Some of those occupied factories are owned or partially owned by foreign capital, the Swiss in particular. Chile's external debt is discussed and renegotiated in Switzerland. In taking over Swiss factories, the government invites retaliation from the Swiss government in the form of crippling economic sanctions and/or boycott that limit Chile's access to credit as well as to manufactured goods from abroad. A worker calls out: look, we're not talking about international relations here; we're talking about nationalizing all the factories that interest us—without making any compromises. That's the role of the CUT (presumably, not to compromise).[25] Another adds, advising a different form of explanation: all this talk of international relations is not going to sit well with the workers. If you don't provide more local reasons (for halting occupations), using more plain language—the workers will disobey the

CUT leadership.





Round three of the filmed debate. [Left] "Chico" Mosquera, an elected representative of the Central Única de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT). [Right] An objection from the floor, after which the crowd erupts in applause. From *The Battle of Chile, Part II* (Patricio Guzmán, 1976).

Round Three. Mosquera: okay, yes, we can provide more local reasons. The worker's government only controls a part of the apparatus of the state. The reactionaries want nothing more than a confrontation between the occupying workers and the forces of order—be they the police or the military. So, if the workers disobey the CUT leadership, if they take justice into their own hands, and confront, physically, the police or the military—then the right will accuse Allende's government of being undisciplined, without a central authority (as the workers would be acting independently). Allende will be impeached, which is what they want. In the most stinging rebuttal, a man from the floor responds: the movie is very clear to us. You told us to organize ourselves across all sectors—in our neighborhoods, in our trade unions, in our industrial belts. We did that. And you keep saying that it isn't the right time, that we have defer to the legislature, to the judiciary, that such-and-such can't be done because this belongs to Queen Isabel and that belongs to Switzerland. This is all bureaucracy, and it's dividing us! It shows that neither the President nor the CUT nor the Popular Unity politicians have faith in us, in popular power, in our capacity to win. The room erupts in clapping.

But the sequence doesn't end there as it could have. If it had, it would have clearly signaled the film's sympathy with this feel-good battle cry from the most charismatic speaker so far.

Round Four. Mosquera gets the last word, delivered as a gesture of reconciliation:

"Here power isn't achieved only through good organization. There [must] be good organization. But we also need to have some weight to counter-balance the real power of the reactionaries."

Mosquera will acknowledge the mistakes of the leadership and he will acknowledge that the objections of the room are not ill-intentioned. But he will also try to make the case for centralization: that worker actions should not



Round four of the filmed debate. "Chico" Mosquera, an elected representative of the Central Única de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT).

From *The Battle of Chile, Part II* (Patricio Guzmán, 1976).

proceed in parallel to the worker's organizations, but should take their lead from those organizations and from the government.

This is clear example of internal debate on the left. It might even look like an enactment of the conflict between so-called reformists (represented by Mosquera) and so-called revolutionaries (represented by the *cordon* workers). But, in its focus on process, the sequence emphasizes the meaningfulness of intense comradely disagreement. There are no moralistic denunciations (though clearly there is a foregrounding of the threat of those). No one's position is reactionary or backward. This reads as democratic deliberation.

But perhaps the even more significant accomplishment of the sequence is that it does not merely *allude* to the fact that there is internal conflict and disagreement on the left; a single round of the debate could have produced a *debate-effect* with the viewer noting: "ah, yes, there was internal debate." Rather, the duration of the sequence, the number of rounds in the argument/counter-argument cycle, the intelligibility of the articulated *positions*—all these aspects of the sequence are the product of deliberate filmmaker choice.



Four rounds in the representation of the debate between the CUT leadership and the workers of the Recoleta industrial belt. The CUT delegate is in the left column; the Recoleta workers appear in the other images

Together, they have a very powerful, pedagogical effect. The point of the sequence is not to side with the charismatic voice from the floor against the nervous and hesitant leadership. In other words, the film is not so much advancing an argument *here*. The point is to be touched by an awareness of the *difficulty* of the *strategic* questions. It is an invitation to *think*—to enter into the complications of the particular circumstances and try on different positions in the debate. More specifically, it forces one to think about the tortuousness of the so-called legal road to socialism. It forces one to consider why socialism in one country faces such obstacles within the context of an inter-connected, globalized world economy. It forces one to contend with both democratic and hierarchical structures within and across worker organizations. It forces one to face the implications of the actual power of repressive state apparatuses like the military and the police.

I think what is most potent about this sequence is that the words matter; they betray a very high-level of discourse, a sophisticated grasp of the political landscape. The scene reveals a seemingly broad base of *active* participation in

political deliberation. And because of the specificity of the representation—its insistence on the details of the debate (as I am doing now) and the physical variety of the debaters—it thwarts the temptation to allegorize: the participants aren't functioning as stand-ins or types. They aren't mere mouthpieces of the "reformist" line that sought a consolidation of Allende's gains or the "revolutionary" line that wanted to push through to a more radical transformation of the society. As a consequence of their embodied speech, I am induced into really engaging with the *terms* of the debate; my wish for clear answers—as if I were judging from some all-seeing perch, above the fray—thwarted. Maybe the film's narration will ultimately side with the charismatic worker articulating a version of the "revolutionary" line (the bureaucracy slowed the process too much; it should have abandoned the legal path sooner), but the better course of action was far from obvious. The sequence fills me with that perception of disorientation that must have characterized the historical moment.

"The Power of the People"

While this scene from Part II may represent the height of a meaningful practice of popular power through democratic debate and deliberation, it is Part III that is actually expressly devoted to the practices of popular power. Part III, "The Power of the People," has received the least scholarly attention. Indeed, it often even goes unshown when Parts I and II play. Like the other two parts, it is constructed from footage of mass actions and person-on-the-street interviews. In contrast to the two other parts, this part is the most romantic: the analytic drive of Parts I and II has largely fallen away; and the meaning of events has become fixed. This part will, to my mind, foreshadow the shift in Guzmán's work to a more poetic, haptic register.

The ostensible topic of Part III, "popular power," focuses the spectator's attention squarely on the agency of the person-on-the-street, on all the ways that ordinary people (workers, peasants, students, intellectuals) tried to advance the transition to socialism by organizing—democratically and in microcosm—the new society within the structures of what continued to be a bourgeois, capitalist state. [26] The Opposition or chestrated a transportation stoppage; the workers organized other ways to get to work. The Opposition effected the bosses' abandonment of factories and the work stoppages of a professional class of workers on whom production depended (engineers, etc.); the factory workers took over the management of production and conspired with class-traitor professionals. The Opposition coordinated with the United States to halt the importation of spare parts; the workers fabricated their own. The Opposition promoted hoarding among small shopkeepers and exchange on the black market that in turn led to food shortages; neighborhood cooperatives took over food distribution, setting up distribution networks that connected food producers directly to neighborhood-run stores. The Opposition used the courts to stall the state's expropriation of unproductive land; peasant cooperatives occupied the land and produced food for the neighborhood cooperatives, etc..

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At the level of film form, this third part contains a breathtaking sequence—what Barbara Klinger might call "an arresting image"—that materializes in a single sound-image the fraught relation between individual and social force.[27] [open endnotes in new window] For the first time, the film will incorporate an extradiegetic musical motif by J.A. Quintano that recurs across Part III, and that will end the entire film. The motif is first introduced in the credit sequence of Part III, but fades by the first shot. Its true, robust introduction occurs almost exactly halfway through the 78-minute film, and it is attached here to an image that also has no precedent across the three parts of *The Battle of Chile*. The one-minute, thirty-second tracking shot follows closely a hand-pulled rickshaw moving down a Santiago street.[28]



An arresting image. Man pulling rickshaw. From *The Battle of Chile, Part III* (Patricio Guzmán, 1979).

It is encumbered with several feet of what look like building material, and a person atop that. The sun is low enough in the sky that the rickshaw casts a deep shadow between itself and the camera. The camera films the sunlight head-on, producing a lens flare effect. The shot is uncanny, as it reveals the young man who is (ostensibly) pulling the rickshaw to be almost gliding along the road. His touch is so light that at moments his feet seem not to touch the ground at all, but to be perpetually suspended above it in a leap. Is he propelling the rickshaw or is the rickshaw propelling him?

The non-synchronous melody that accompanies the shot is a downbeat version of "Venceremos," the 1970 *Nueva Cancion* hymn of the Popular Unity Party by Claudio Iturra and Sergio Ortega (and associated with the communist singersongwriter, Victor Jara, who was tortured and killed during the dictatorship of Pinochet). This rendition is played on the traditional Andean wind instrument, the quena. The fragile, slowed down melody played on a voice instrument contrasts sharply with the upbeat, triumphant, folk-march music and lyrics of the original song, which were intended to be sung *en masse* as a kind of anthem:

"From the deep crucible of the homeland/ The people's voices rise

up./The new day comes over the horizon. All Chile breaks out in song... Peasants, soldiers, miners,/And the women of our country, as well,/Students, workers, white-collar and blue./We'll do our duty. We'll sow the land with glory./ Socialism will be our future./All together, we will be history's completion./ We shall prevail, we shall prevail/A thousand chains we'll have to break,/We shall prevail, we shall prevail/We know how to overcome misery."

This short sequence is haunting, in a way that is uncharacteristic of *The Battle of Chile*. Despite its singularity—, as an image, it figures the reciprocal relation of *the people* to history and to historical change. The thin man pulling the rickshaw stands-in allegorically for *the people*, while the rickshaw figures the movement and dynamism of history, a movement which is neither without the direction given it by people nor entirely *determined* by their intentional efforts. The rickshaw is surely moved by the man and his laboring, but the rickshaw also appears to be moving the man along; history is directed by agents, but it also directs them, or as Marx writes in the opening lines of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited." [29]

The shot represents the relation as no other image of locomotion could; it functions, I would argue, as an unmistakable iconographic visualization of "popular power."

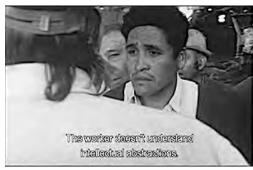
The tune adds a plaintive, nostalgic note. "Venceremos" was a rallying cry. While it was written in a moment when it seemed possible that socialism would be Chile's future, that Allende would prevail, and so its legacy will always be tied to the stunning defeat of 1973. Whether this defeat represents the loss of a battle or the loss of a war remains to be seen, the film ultimately suggests. Still, the melodrama of the shot is almost too much. In 1979 when the film was seen around the world (except Chile), it was already too late; what might have been wasn't: we know it and every viewer knows it. But the man pulling the rickshaw surely didn't know it, nor did Jorge Müller Silva, the cameraman who filmed this moment and who would be disappeared and probably tortured and killed by Pinochet's forces shortly after the coup. How must that moment have seemed to them? Did it seem that their world was on the verge of a change, and that they were the agents of that change?

This uncanny shot of the man pulling that icon of a pre-industrial, colonial past—the rickshaw—stands out because it is a romanticized sound-image of worker agency—full of love, but also of the pity and resignation that comes with superior knowledge. This shot—in all its beauty and complexity—is a crystallization of the ideology that transforms the person-on-the-street into an unimpeachable witness to history. But while this ideology may indeed guide most deployments of the person-on-the-street interview, *The Battle of Chile* has largely avoided this brand of worker romanticization until this point, the point at which the analysis of the balance of social forces gives way to an eruption of mourning.

Allies versus comrades

In the last third of Part III, the romanticization of the worker takes on a distinct resonance. For the first time in a film comprised of many shots of crowds and several person-on-street-interviews with unnamed, anonymous social actors, a character begins to emerge. He is Ernesto Malbrán, and his voice-over will end the entire film. Malbrán was a college friend of Guzmán's. At the time of the filming, Malbrán had left his university studies in theater to take up a post as director of public relations for the nationalized industrial sector. In one sequence,







Malbrán discusses how to rationally organize the work of the repair shops. From *The Battle of Chile, Part III* (Patricio Guzmán, 1979).

Malbrán is explaining what the workers are doing in an Atacama saltpeter factory to maintain production after the bosses abandon their positions; he is arguing for more centralized oversight of the production of spare parts. In effect, he is arguing for the expediency of a division of labor—or, put differently, for a conductor to lead the orchestra.[30] Circled by workers, he explains over three shots,

"[Shot 1, top] If, at this moment, there's an imperialist blockade and we don't receive raw material or spare parts, what do we have to do in industry? We have to plan production, and provide organization and good administration for the repair shops and for the foundries. Without repair shops, you can't have industrial development in this country. At this moment, the repair shops are the heart, which can keep the rest of the industry's machinery alive and functioning. Because, the comrades here make spare parts. [Shot 2, middle] These comrades invent the spare parts that we need. They make the pieces that they need! The worker thinks concretely; he doesn't understand university abstractions. The worker is fed up with listening to words. [Shot 3, bottom] The demands which our comrade made are very serious. What is he demanding? Objectives, goals in the repair shop. What is he demanding? A rational administration of the repair shop, with production plans. We can't carry on with little workshops in each section because that means a lack of administration, on the one hand, and a dispersion of resources, on the other hand. And this qualified workforce will get tired and leave. They will get disillusioned. There is no comrade here who supports fascism. They are all workers, and they have a tremendous worker consciousness."[31]

Malbrán is doing a lot of talking in this sequence, and as he says these words, the handheld camera surveys—sometimes in medium shots, sometimes in extreme close-ups—the small group of workers collected around him listening. When Malbrán says of the workers that they think concretely, that they don't understand [no entienden] university abstractions, that "the worker is cabreado de palabras [fed-up with words]," his words sting, particularly because the shot, as it shifts focus to the workers surrounding Malbrán, forces one to imagine them heard by the workers that he describes. One wonders whether the workers feel badly about this description. One wonders whether the filmmakers have self-consciously included this bit, whether the camera operator deliberately surveyed the effect of Malbrán's words on the small crowd. And if so, why.

One is strongly inclined to dislike Malbrán at this moment and many viewers do; his well-intentioned condescension is difficult to forgive. For the first time, someone has spoken *for* the workers. They are seen and not heard, and that changes the dynamic drastically. For the first time, they are like a chorus. And while it may seem that there is a tension here between romanticizing the personon-the-street's testimony by treating it as uniformly unimpeachable as Part III largely does and speaking for *the people*—, in fact, I would claim that, paradoxically, these are two sides of the same coin. Both modes essentialize *the people*: in the first case by projecting supernatural wisdom and total mastery onto human beings; and in the second case by treating the workers as a symbol, an undifferentiated mass-block of mute doers. In practice, this is a stance almost universally reserved for perceived inferiors.

Malbrán's words will end the film. In the last minutes of the film, Malbrán has taken over the task of interviewing the workers of the saltpeter factory—in effect taking Guzmán's place. One worker makes the case that supporters of Allende must be armed, that the dream of a democratic road to socialism must be given up



Malbrán takes over Guzman's role at the end of Part III. From *The Battle of Chile, Part III* (Patricio Guzmán, 1979).



Last shot of *The Battle of Chile, Part III* (Patricio Guzmán, 1979).



From Nostalgia for the Light (Patricio Guzmán, 2010).

and that Allende must marshal the power of the state to forcibly impose the revolution. "Now is our chance to do it. We have to do it now or never. Because the enemy knows what's in store for him." The film's recurrent plaintive musical tune picks up. As the image slowly zooms out from the saltpeter mine it reveals a flat and empty Atacama landscape, an image that foreshadows Guzmán's 2010 film, Nostalgia de la luz. Meanwhile the worker's voice, clearly neither synchronous nor simultaneous with the image anymore, finishes the thought, "He [the enemy] knows that he'll never get back what he's lost... and he's like the devil." And then Malbrán seemingly responds, in voice-over: "Let's walk, comrade. We'll see each other around, comrade. Goodbye." "We'll be seeing each other," the worker says, reworking Malbrán's syntax. "May we come out ahead. It's now or never," he adds. The zoom comes to a stop and the moving image is replaced by a freeze frame of barren flatness, and now Malbrán's same words from earlier replay: "Let's walk, comrade. We'll see each other around, comrade." [32]

What strikes me in this ending is the repetition of the word "compañero." This usually is translated as "comrade," and Malbrán uses it—perhaps even ostentatiously—throughout the last half of the film. These last lines have me imagining the two figures—Malbrán and the worker—walking toward the horizon in this bare, otherworldly landscape; it is an image that evokes the no place/good place of utopia. They walk in the same direction. This is another allegorical sound image, but it is one that figures the fraught relationship between the people and the intellectual/artist, for surely Malbrán here is a stand-in for Guzmán but also for a social sector whose loyalties are often divided. That familiar gulf between workers/peasants and middle-class intellectuals has long produced difficult relations, and romantic representations. Are Malbrán and the worker together like friends—despite all their differences? We want to imagine so. Yet the phrasing of the last line of the film suggests something else: "We'll see each other around, comrade." It's not friendship, exactly. Or we might say it's a specific kind of political friendship—not allyship, but comradeship.

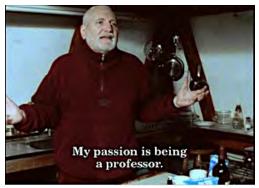
"The term comrade," writes the political theorist Jodi Dean in her recent manifesto, titled "Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging," "indexes a political relation, a set of expectations for action toward a common goal." She goes on,

"Comradeship binds action, and in this binding, this solidarity, it collectivizes and directs action in light of a shared vision for the future." [33]

The term's anachronistic ring—its association with failed political experiments and seemingly barren forms of political organization like the party—is precisely why Dean likes it. "Comrade is a carrier of utopian longing"—it estranges the present and injects a hopeful note—an ego ideal—in the thought about the future. Comradeship is not like allyship. In contrast to comrades, Dean writes, "allies are privileged people who want to do something about oppression. They may not consider themselves survivors or victims, but they want to help." "To be an ally is to work to cultivate in oneself habits of proper listening, to decenter oneself, to step aside and become aware of the lives and experiences of others." [43] Unlike in comradeship, in allyship it is not action that matters, but identity. Allyship treats struggles as possessions, acquisitions, to which some have no right. "Where the ally is hierarchical, specific, and acquiescent, the comrade is egalitarian, generic, and utopian." [35] Ultimately, Dean makes the case that allyship is a symptom of the displacement of politics onto "the individualist self-help techniques and social media moralism of communicative capitalism."

"Communicative capitalism enjoins uniqueness. We are commanded to be ourselves, express ourselves, do it ourselves. Conforming, copying, and letting another speak for us are widely thought to be





Two consecutive shots of Malbrán in *Chile*, *Obstinate Memory* (Patricio Guzmán, 1997). [Top] Archival footage of Malbrán characterizing the "concrete" thought of workers from *The Battle of Chile*, *Part III* is included in *Chile*, *Obstinate Memory* (1997). [Bottom] The following shot of the aged Malbrán in *Chile*, *Obstinate Memory* (1997).

somehow bad, indicative of weakness, ignorance, or unfreedom. The impossibility of an individual politics, the fact that political change is always and only collective is displaced into an inchoate conviction that we are determined by systems and forces completely outside our capacity to affect them." [36]

What I wish to pull out of the conclusion of *The Battle of Chile* is a tension between the condescending Malbrán, whose kind of transgression is today probably the favorite target of so called call out culture on the left, and the solidarious Malbrán, the class traitor Malbrán, who has left his university studies to put his skills and his energy at the service of Allende's experiment in forging a democratic road to socialism. Guzmán will incorporate the offending sequence discussed above into his 1997 film Chile, Memoria Obstinada, perhaps poking fun at his old friend. Malbrán-with his all his words, his fancy education, his middleclass pedigree, his white skin—what kind of friend could he be, after all. Always speaking for other people. Within the framework of allyship, Malbrán would require re-education, perhaps he's even irrecuperable. But what if he is something else? What if he is—genuinely—a comrade? There is no question that Malbrán's condescension is unpalatable, but it follows—paradoxically—from too much allyship, too much worker romanticization, too much Manichean melodrama. It follows from the familiar gulf that separates workers from intellectuals, that has led to intellectuals treating the worker like some special creature from a different universe.

Still, *The Battle of Chile*, even in its oscillation between an analytic mode and this more romantic register, ultimately affirms the ethos of the comrade—an ethos in which self-expression, the person-on-the-street testimony, is treated as subject to debate and contestation, just like everything else that humans are involved in. This is the last lesson I would wish to take from *The Battle of Chile*, apt for our *now*.

As I said at the outset, this has been an experiment in re-enlivening. But even if this piece of film criticism has succeeded in re-enlivening the object, one might rightfully ask—and I frequently ask myself this question— "So what? What does re-enlivening accomplish anyway?" This question takes me to the heart of what a meaningful Marxist film and media studies might look like—and do. Does Marxist film and media studies merely take up topics of relevance to the Marxist tradition (such as any old moving image representation of revolution or social change, labor or class)? Does it concentrate on privileged objects like Eisenstein's films or like *The Battle of Chile*—that is, objects with established Marxist formal and political commitments? Is it better thought of in methodological terms as restricted to certain approaches? Can it be expected to intervene in the world of struggle outside the academy? Or is it enough for it to contribute to keeping alive (for an audience of few) a tradition of theoretical and historical analysis and prompt debate and disagreement? I expect this special section will help sort through these questions.

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Notes

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- 1. See Julianne Burton, "The old and the new: Latin American cinema at the (last) Pesaro Festival," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* no. 9 (1975); see Zuzana Pick, "Chilean cinema: ten years of exile (1973-83)," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* no. 32 (April 1987); see Victor Wallis, "*Battle of Chile: Struggle of a People without Arms,*" *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary* Media no. 21 (November 1979); see Victor Wallis, "*Battle of Chile: Struggle of a People without Arms,*" *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* no. 52 (summer 2010). [return to page 1]
- 2. While the phrase "man-on-the-street" interview is the familiar way to refer to an interview with an "ordinary" anonymous person, in the rest of this essay I will use the gender-neutral formulation "person-on-the-street" instead.
- 3. Even the contemporary literature on *The Battle of Chile* (in both Spanish and English) is surprisingly sparse for such an important film. The most in-depth treatments of the film that I know of are Lopez's excellent, "*The Battle of Chile:* Documentary, Political Process, and Representation" in *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, edited by Julianne Burton (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990) and Jorge Ruffinelli's chapter in *El cine de Patricio Guzmán: en busca de las imágenes verdaderas* (Chile: Uqbar editors, 2008).
- 4. Maria Luisa Ortega, "La Batalla de Chile/ The Battle of Chile," in *The cinema of Latin America* edited by Alberto Elena and Marina Díaz López (London: Wallflower Press, 2003): 158.
- 5. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017): 77.
- 6. Ana Lopez emphasizes the analytic character of the film, but her emphasis is a bit different from mine. See Lopez, *"The Battle of Chile:* Documentary, Political Process, and Representation."
- 7. See Judith Butler's useful discussion of popular sovereignty in "We the People"—Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly from her book, Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly (Harvard University Press, 2015). Although Butler here is by no means focused on visual representation, visual representation is taken up briefly when Butler makes the straightforward point that "no picture of the crowd can represent the people" (165). And yet, in media representations, pictures of crowds do routinely stand-in for the notion of "the people." We might add that the terms of this synecdochic substitution across the history of moving

image media bear investigation, not least because the current sense of what resistance to the state looks like is surely a consequence of a media effect. Butler helpfully notes that,

- "Access to any public square presupposes access to some media that relays the events outside of that space and time; the public square is now partially established as a media effect, but also as part of the enunciatory apparatus by which a group of people claims to be the people.... This implies the need to radically rethink the public square as always already dispersed through the media representation without which it loses its representative claim" (167).
- 8. Typage is a kind of practice that reveals a commitment to allegory: actors are chosen for the extent to which—based on their appearance—they represent social types (i.e. *the* industrial capitalist, *the* factory worker, *the* peasant, *the* military commander, etc.). The films that employ typage, then, are easily read as conflicts between groups (represented diegetically by "typical"-looking individuals. The selection, based on appearance, may represent a case where the selected actor is chosen to play a role that does not correspond to a biographical fact about the actor (i.e. so an industrialist might be played by a non-actor who earns their living working in a factory). See Abe Geil's "Dynamic Typicality" in *Sergei M. Esisenstein: Notes for a General History of Cinema*, eds. N. Kleiman and A. Somaini (Amsterdam University Press, 2016) for an excellent account of typage.
- 9. Marx, Karl, Mark Cowling, and James Martin. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire:* (post)modern Interpretations. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002, 39.
- 10. Marx, Karl, Mark Cowling, and James Martin. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire:* (post)modern Interpretations. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002, 40.
- 11. In this respect, the account troubles the classic view of the state as containing a monopoly on the legitimate right to use force; see Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Edited by Talcott Parsons. (New York, N.Y.: Free Press, 1964); Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991). [return to page 2]
- 12. Marx, Karl, Mark Cowling, and James Martin. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire:* (post)modern Interpretations. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002, 116.
- 13. The temporality of this slogan is striking. See Walter Benjamin's notion of now-time in "On the Concept of History."
- 14. The representation of the crowd on film has a long filmography as well as an abundant literature that makes important distinctions between the ornamental, fascist crowds of Leni Riefenstahl and Fritz Lang; the unruly mob theorized by Gustave Le Bon and evident in, for example, D.W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1921); and the loosely organized but not anarchic crowds of leftist films. See Siegfried Kracauer's "The Mass Ornament" and *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton UP, 1960); Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies, Vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (UMinnesota Press, 1987); *Crowds* (eds. Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, Stanford UP, 2006); Stefan Jonsson's *Crowds and Democracy: The Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism* (Columbia UP, 2013).
- 15. For more on the political conflicts within Popular Unity, see Ian Roxborough, Philip O'Brien, and Jackie Roddick, *Chile: The State and Revolution* (1977) and Marian Schlotterbeck's *Beyond the Vanguard: Everyday Revolutionaries in Allende's Chile* (2018).

- 16. While this sector overlaps with what might be considered "the middle class," it is not identical. Professional organizations and associations (groupings whose members often identify as middle class) cooperated with the Allende government in 1971. Still, some historians point to Popular Unity's loss of support among the middle layers by 1973 as crucial for the success of the coup. That is surely part of Guzmán's story here. For more on the historian's assessment, see Casals, Marcelo. "The Insurrection of the Middle Class: Social Mobilization and Counterrevolution during the Popular Unity Government, Chile, 1970-1973," in *Journal of Social History* vol.54, issue 3 (Spring 2021).
- 17. Marx, Karl, Mark Cowling, and James Martin. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire:* (post)modern Interpretations. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002, 24. Emphasis mine. It must be noted that Marx here seems to analogize the situation of France taken "unawares" by Bonaparte to a woman taken "unawares" by a rapist. The point seems to be that both France and the raped woman were not adequately on guard and that, once caught, did not resist. Moreover, Marx appears to be critical of the unguardedness and quiescence of both France and the raped woman. Although he seems to be characterizing a received wisdom (i.e. "a nation, like a woman, is not forgiven...) using the passive voice, he is not invoking this received wisdom in order to contest it, but rather as a kind of support for what he will say next. The use of the analogy is unfortunate, and for my purposes both confusing and distracting. And although the idea I wish to convey is best conveyed by the first and fourth sentences of the passage, I have included this problematic second sentence so as not to unwittingly "cleanse" Marx's text.
- 18. Empty store shelves are a cliché in the media treatments of Cuba after the Revolution, for example.
- 19. Marx, Karl, Mark Cowling, and James Martin. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire:* (post)modern Interpretations. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002, 19.
- 20. Although "false consciousness" is often considered an off-limits term, there have been some recent attempts to rehabilitate it including by Steven Lukes, who begins a clear-throated defense with these lines, "I want to defend the answer to a question. The answer is 'false consciousness." Lukes writes,

"I conclude that people can sometimes, even often, be mistaken about their interests and the mistakes they make can be conceptual and cognitive... In particular, they can exhibit what has been given the name false consciousness. As our examples show, they can have systematically distorted beliefs about the social order and their own place in it that work systematically against their interests...and, in general, be unable to see what links 'public issues' and policies with 'private troubles.' To state these conclusions need not invoke any epistemic privilege, while nonetheless assuming that, in these matters, there is truth to be attained" (28).

See Steven Lukes, "In Defense of 'False Consciousness," University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 2011, Article 3. Moreover, even Terry Eagleton, in his balanced survey of various theories of ideology from 1991 flatly refuses to throw out the notion of false consciousness. He gives a multi-faceted account of false consciousness and the arguments for and against it as a useful notion. Here is a taste of the latter:

"Any ruling ideology which failed altogether to mesh with its subjects' lived experience would be extremely vulnerable, and its exponents would be well advised to trade it in for another. But none of this contradicts the fact that ideologies quite often contain important propositions which are absolutely false: that Jews are inferior beings,

that women are less rational than men, that fornicators will be condemned to perpetual torment. If these views are not instances of false consciousness, then it is difficult to know what is; and those who dismiss the whole notion of false consciousness must be careful not to appear cavalier about the offensiveness of these opinions" (13).

And later:

"For those who hold that thesis [of false consciousness] do not need to deny that certain kinds of illusion can express real needs and desires. All they may be claiming is that it is false to believe that murderers should be executed, or that Archangel Gabriel is preparing to put in an appearance next Tuesday, and that these falsehoods are significantly bound up with the reproduction of a dominant political power. There need be no implication that people do not regard themselves as having good grounds for holding these beliefs; the point may simply be that what they believe is manifestly not the case, and that this is a matter of relevance to political power" (14).

See Terry Eagleton's *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso Press, 1991). [return to page 3]

- 21. See Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988): 349.
- 22. Marx, Karl, Mark Cowling, and James Martin. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire:* (post)modern Interpretations. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002, 43.
- 23. Ruffinelli cites Alain Touriane's grand claim that whatever the ultimate outcome, "Chile will have supplied the revolutionary movement a unique form: the industrial cordones." See Ruffinelli, p. 113.
- 24. For this context, see see Ian Roxborough, Philip O'Brien, and Jackie Roddick, *Chile: The State and Revolution* (1977).
- 25. Here we can hear a clear echo of the "revolutionaries" slogan: "Advance without Compromise."
- 26. See Schlotterbeck, Marian. *Beyond the Vanguard: Everyday Revolutionaries in Allende's Chile*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.
- 27. For more on the "arresting image," see Klinger, "The Art Film, Affect and the Female Viewer," in *Screen* 47:1 (Spring 2006). Ruffinelli takes note of this sequence in a single line, calling it "a magical interlude or powerful instance of visual punctuation"; it is one of the most striking of Part III for him as well. In a footnote, he cites the editor Chaskel describing to him how iconic the scene depicted is and how the team came to include this unusual sequence. See Ruffinelli, o. 114. [Return to page 4]
- 28. Victor Wallis discuss this shot in his 2010 review of Icarus' 4-disc DVD release of *The Battle of Chile*. Wallis writes, "The grit, the love, and the pathos of the people's struggle are fused in this shot." See Wallis.
- 29. Marx, Karl, Mark Cowling, and James Martin. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire:* (post)modern Interpretations. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002, 19.
- 30. See Karl Marx. *Capital*, Vol. III, chapter XXIII. New York, NY: International Publishers, 1967: 383.
 - "[A]ll labour in which many individuals co-operate necessarily

requires a commanding will to co-ordinate and unify the process, and functions which apply not to partial operations but to the total activity of the workshop, much as that of an orchestra conductor. This is a productive job, which must be performed in every combined mode of production."

- 31. Ruffinelli also cites this bit as an example of the "conflicts over language between vertical theory and the horizontality of need." That is, the theoretical language of the leadership and the common language of the "ordinary" worker. (Another example of this conflict occurs in the CUT meeting I discuss above.) For Ruffinelli, Malbrán's formulation is not problematic or cringeworthy. On the contrary, "the film needed some broad final analysis, something eloquent, that could integrate in a single figure all its fragmentary elements. That is Malbrán's function…" (116). Ruffinelli's description here might be thought of a perfect set-up for a critique of the old left, though Ruffinelli is not interested in mounting such a critique; neither am I, though for other reasons.
- 32. I have made this point in a short online review of Guzmán's *The Cordillera of Dreams* (2019) published in the June 2021 installment of *Docalogue*: https://docalogue.com/the-cordillera-of-dreams/
- 33. Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019): 2.
- 34. Dean, 16, 19.
- 35. Dean, 22.
- 36. Dean, 22 (emphasis mine).

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Painting of McNally by Lauren Crazybull.



Tarro Kappo reflecting on her family's tradition of beading buckskin jackets during their resistance to the Canadian Government's assimilationist white paper in 1969 in *Beading Red*.

Grounded abstractions: an interview with Conor McNally

by Robert Jackson

Conor McNally is a Métis filmmaker living in amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton) Alberta, Canada. McNally's collection of films ranges from absurdist reflections of prairie hockey culture (*MCDAVID*, 2015) to Indigenous women's contributions to the political activism of the 1960's (*Beading Red*, 2021); from a moving portrait of his brother's struggles with incarceration and mental health (*Very Present*, 2020) to short collaborations with contemporary Indigenous artists like Dene / Blackfoot painter Lauren Crazybull (*IIKAAKIIMAAT*, 2019) and the band nêhiyawak (*nipiy*, 2020).

McNally's most celebrated film $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ (2017) is a reflection on history, nêhiyaw (Cree) narrative imagination, and territory. [Editor's note: the film can be seen on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/203909985.] McNally's documentary practice is rooted in Indigenous philosophies that emphasize balanced and healthy relationships between humans and the more than human world. Read in and against the framework of settler colonialism—which attempts to reinscribe all social relations within capital's grammars of possession, accumulation, and domination—McNally's focus on Indigenous social relations offers both a critique of settler colonialism's dispossessive order and an affirmation of Indigenous lives, lifeways, and aesthetics.

I sat down with McNally is the fall of 2021 to talk about $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$, his development as a filmmaker, and the ways that Indigenous conceptions of kinship shape the representations of collectivity and the category of the political in his films. In this preface to my interview with McNally, I offer some conceptual and political context for $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ in an effort to bring the film's formal and thematic innovations to bear on this special dossier's call to nuance and deepen contemporary Marxist film and media criticism. Specifically, I consider how McNally's attention to land as a site of spiritual, material, and political relation renders necessary a more fulsome engagement with settler colonialism in Marxist thought.

ôtênaw follows the nêhiyaw scholar Dwayne Donald on a walk through amiskwaciwâskahikan's river valley. Donald is renowned in Edmonton for these walks, during which he braids together nêhiyaw philosophy, an analysis of the dynamics of accumulation and dispossession that characterize the city's colonial development, and land-based approaches to decolonial education. Donald's stories provide the narrative structure of the film, as well as its cinematic foreground. Shot largely on a 16mm camera, ôtênaw sets Donald's stories in a rich visual topography composed of atmospheric shots of the lands; archival photographs of Indigenous life in the late nineteenth century; painterly abstractions; and footage of Donald, the storyteller. In many moments throughout the film, McNally's speckled black and white cinematography blurs into archival photographs and painted abstractions that accompany Donald's stories on the soundtrack.



McNally's most celebrated film *ôtênaw* (2017) —"a perfect place to plant tobacco."



If Donald's stories provide the narrative structure of $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$, McNally's visual constellations are the poetics of its composition. These constellations *presence* Indigenous lives and lifeways despite what Donald repeatedly calls the "façade" of the settler state's literal and figurative architecture. The temporal palimpsest of McNally's frames gives the film its historical sensibility: one that troubles a linear chronology of past and present that underwrites colonial mechanics of progress.



A distorted image of Edmonton's skyline.

In *ôtênaw*, McNally experiments with exposure and abstraction, opacity and transparency, offering images of history as an animated relational space. This representation of history resists both stagist, colonial narratives of progress that haunt historical materialism as well as tropes of authenticity that capture Indigeneity with anthropological expectations of legitimacy and legibility.[1][open endnotes in new window]

In this collision of image and history, McNally's formal experiments resonate with Walter Benjamin's famous—and famously elusive—presentation of the dialectical image. In a well-known passage from *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes:

"It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (462).



Abstract painting overlaid on photo of Treaty 6.

One exemplary still from McNally's film overlays an archival photograph of the official Treaty 6 document with an abstract painting McNally composed on the original 16mm film with which he filmed the rest of the documentary. Treaty 6 was an agreement entered into in 1876 by the British Crown and a series of Indigenous nations. Today, Treaty 6 territory stretches from western Alberta, through Saskatchewan, and into Manitoba and includes 50 First Nations.[2]

In *ôtênaw*, McNally's abstractions are often accompanied by either prayers or descriptions of wisdom concepts from nêhiyaw thought. In this particular frame, the blur of abstraction and archive juxtaposes nêhiyaw theories of treaty as a sacred, reciprocal, diplomatic relationship with the contractual treaty theories of the colonizers. In this specific case, McNally's abstraction is set against the treaty document in a way that holds the two together in the contradictory unity of the cinematic frame.

In other words, treaty is presented here as a social contradiction. On one hand, for example, the nêhiyaw legal scholar Sylvia McAdam describes Treaty 6 in relational, kinship terms premised on the protocols and practices of nêhiyaw law. (41, 78) The form of interdependence McAdam describes is one of material, spiritual, and political reciprocity informed deeply by Indigenous peoples' relationship to their territories. On the other hand, as nêhiyaw/Saulteaux academic Gina Starblanket describes it, the dominant colonial narrative of treaties is a story of land transactions which brought Indigenous people and settlers together in relationships of interdependence determined by capitalist logics of abstraction, value, and exchange. (4) In the first instance, treaty is a living, spirited relation meant to govern people's relation to the earth and each other in mutually beneficial ways.[3] In the second, treaty is a reified social form rooted in capitalist contracts of property and (dis)possession.[4]

The image of treaty that $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ represents is neither a "settled" nor merely historical agreement. Neither the archival photo nor the painting take precedent over the other. Instead, the two images occupy the same frame, creating what—in a Benjaminian mode—we might call a "critical moment" (463) in which viewers are not only challenged to discern the implications of the two treaty visions on their own terms, but also the interpretive rupture that their meeting might produce.



Historic image of Edmonton's Rossdale flats, on the contested site of Camp Pekiwewin.

Benjamin's figure of the constellation as a concept for thinking through temporalities also resonates with the role of constellations in the work of many Indigenous philosophers. In her crucial account of Indigenous liberatory thought, for example, Anishinaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes celestial constellations as material, spiritual, and conceptual reminders of the intimate relationships between past, present, and future in Indigenous thought. Simpson writes,

"The future is here in the form of the practices of the present, in which the past is also here influencing. [...] This works because constellations are placed-based relationships, and land-based relationships are the formation of Indigenous thought" (213).

Depending on *where* you are looking from and your relational knowledge of that territory and its stories, you will have a different understanding of the "critical moments" into which constellations invite you.





Edmonton's first coal power plant located in the Rossdale flats where *ôtênaw* is set.



"Basically what wâhkôtowin teaches is that, as human beings, we understand ourselves as enmeshed in a series of relationships that give us life, and we depend on them for our survival. The highest form of human being, the most intelligent – in all the ways you might understand that – is the one who acknowledges that." – Dwayne Donald

One of McNally's painted 16mm frames.

Simpson's emphasis on constellations as *land-based* frameworks for understanding temporality and relationality inflects Benjamin's theory of the image-as-constellation with a particularly *grounded* focus. Simpson's constellatory thought is helpful for a Marxist film and media criticism attuned to the specificities of settler colonialism because it helps us transpose Benjamin's insights from the space of the Arcades—and thus the commodity form *in general*—to a more *particular* focus on way value and domination unfold in settler colonial contexts. This focus on land is particularly important for thinking through *ôtênaw*'s immanent critique of settler colonialism.

ôtênaw is, above all, a film that insists on the importance of Indigenous peoples' personal, collective, political, and ontological relationship with land. Viewed with an eye for how the fundamental contradictions of capitalism play out in settler colonial contexts, the film's representation of land-based relationships is explicitly politicized toward the end of the film when Donald's narratives turn toward the dramatic impacts of what he calls—perhaps in an echo of Karl Polayni—the "great transformation" of private property and settler colonialism.

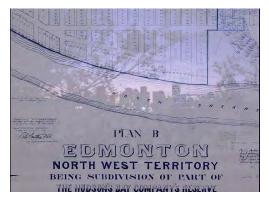
The film's insistence on the importance of land-based relationships to nêhiyaw philosophy comes, in part, by way of the film's organizing philosophical concept: $w\hat{a}hk\hat{o}towin$. Like any philosophical concept, wâhkôtowin is a difficult one to explain. Through my own experiences in land-based education, invitations into nêhiyaw ceremonial practice, and learning from nêhiyaw Elders, knowledge keepers, and scholars, I've come to understand wâhkôtowin as a set of ethical and practical guidelines for living a balanced life informed by a deep respect for the undeniable interdependence of human and more-than-human life. This is not an abstract ideal: it is a material obligation that must be lived and, as $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ displays, Donald's walk is a practice of wâhkôhtowin. In a recent essay, Donald writes:

"Wâhkôhtowin refers to enmeshment within kinship relations that connect all forms of life. When human beings undertake walking as a life practice, the wâhkôhtowin imagination can be activated, wherein the networks of human and more than human relations that enmesh us become vivified and apparent. From this confluence of walking and the wâhkôhtowin imagination emerges the possibility of a new story that can give good guidance on how to live life in accordance with kinship relationality. (55)

ôtênaw's "wâhkôhtowin imagination" invites viewers to entertain the possibilities of reimagining their relationship to land while also describing how the enclosures of private property delimit those possibilities. Following the Dene scholar Glen Coulthard, the primary struggle at stake in ôtênaw, then, is not only struggle

"for land in the material sense, but also deeply informed by what the land as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" (Red Skins 13, emphases in original).

The obligations to live in nondominating and nonexploitative ways that emerge from wahkôtowin provide important foundations of nahiyaw legal, social, and economic life (McAdam). The importance of these kinship relations also makes them the target of capitalist violence both historically and in the contemporary moment. As Marx describes in *Capital Volume 3*, the transformation of land into property requires the destruction of all forms of relating to land that do not fit within the commodity form. As Marx reminds us,



An archival land survey of Edmonton overlaid on the city's contemporary skyline.



Marked gravesite on the energy company EPCOR's "private" property.

"Landed property receives its purely economic form by discarding all its former political and social embellishments and associations, in brief all those traditional accessories, which are denounced as useless and absurd superfluities by the industrial capitalists themselves, as well as their theoretical spokesmen, in the heat of their struggle with landed property" (755).

Here, we find a foundational antagonism that structures settler colonial capital: the need to destroy "traditional" forms of Indigenous land-based social relations in order to impose the "purely economic form" of the commodity.

While rigid forms of Marxist analysis might subordinate the struggle over land to the exploitation of labor, I would argue for a more nuanced analysis that thinks colonial dispossession alongside capitalist exploitation as a core feature of capitalist accumulation. As Coulthard suggests, shifting from an analytical focus of exploitation to the analytic of dispossession allows Marxist scholars a more capacious framework for thinking capitalist social relations, especially in settler colonial contexts (*Red Skins* 14). After all, separating people from the direct means of production—in other words, land—is, for Marx, the prerequisite for proletarianization. Whether or not the dispossessed are incorporated into labor in recognizable ways is secondary. Thus, Coulthard's commitment to a Marxist analytical project, while also acknowledging the different character of class struggle in colonial situations:

"the theory and practice of Indigenous anticolonialism, including Indigenous anticapitalism, is best understood as a struggle inspired by and oriented around the question of land...and less around our emergent status as 'rightless proletarians'" ("Wards" 62).

In fact, Indigenous peoples' negative, or uneven, access to the reproductive technology of the wage is one of the primary ways in which Indigeneity is structured by capital. Disproportionately high rates of incarceration, houselessness, poverty, lack of access to clean drinking water, and violence against Indigenous women, queer, and two-spirit people are all expressions of Indigenous peoples' superfluity to the market. In other words, abjection rather than exploitation is one of the primary mediations of capital's relationship to Indigenous peoples. Here, forms of containment, such as residential schools, reservations, and incarceration must be read as the ongoing practices of "discarding" and "denouncing" "traditional" relationships to land that threaten the purely economic form of property.

While scenes of the land and its relations consistently ground $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ along the banks of the kiskâciwan-sipîy (North Saskatchewan River), the film explicitly speaks about the dynamics of dispossession in its final movement. In one particularly pertinent example, Donald tells the story of Indigenous people who had been commissioned by early settlers at Fort Edmonton to hunt and provide food for them as they were struggling to survive the winter. When the Indigenous communities saw that the settlers were gardening in the spring, they reasonably



The banks of the North Saskatchewan River.



Private Property sign representing the enclosure of Indigenous land by EPCOR energy company.

assumed that since they had shared the abundance of their skills, knowledge, and territories with the settlers, they should expect the same reciprocity. But once they started to harvest potatoes from the garden, they noticed that settlers began to fence off their land, eventually adding armed guards to protect the garden from "thieves." Donald's story connects the privatization of land in amiskwaciwâskahikan to a global, if uneven, history capitalist enclosure.

Notably, in the fall of 2020, the scene of this conflict over the garden—land just south of what is now the Alberta Legislature grounds—was home to the Pekiwewin Prayer and Relief Camp. [5] Led by queer, two-spirit, femme Indigenous activists, the camp was a grassroots response to the acute crises of COVID-19 and the opioid epidemic as well as the perennial crises of houselessness, police brutality and poverty that impact many urban Indigenous people in Edmonton. Camp Pekiwewin lasted for three and a half months and was home to over 400 people. Despite the services it offered and the community fostered, however, the camp was subject to constant surveillance, criminalization, and hostility from the City of Edmonton, the cops, and homeowners in the surrounding neighborhoods. As winter set in, residents of the camp were forcibly removed by armed police officers in hazmat suits, their homes and possessions were bulldozed and trashed, and their community was replaced by a crude metal fence protected by the daily presence of security guards. The fact that these two stories take place over a century apart, on the same patch of land, and follow settler capital's predictable trajectory of dispossession, criminalization, and enclosure are realities that ôtênaw's formal and conceptual offers prepare us for. However, as McNally's cinematic practice insistently teaches us, they are not the only realities.



Police in hazmat suits evicting residents of Camp Pekiwewin. Photograph by author.

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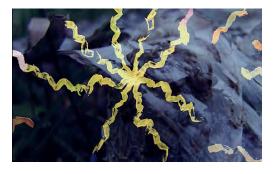


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Image of Salmon eggs from Obomsawin's Incident at Restigouche.



Hand painted still from ôtênaw.

Interview

Robert Jackson: How did you how did you come to filmmaking?

Conor McNally: My dad is a professional actor, so I grew up in the Edmonton theater scene, I guess. He would do TV shows and small Canadian movies and stuff like that. There were actors at the house all the time, there were parties at the house all the time like, you know, performing arts communities. I grew up in that kind of atmosphere. Of course, my brother and I would borrow our grandparent's video camera, like whoever's video camera we could get, and make the silliest movies. That kind of transitioned into me shooting skate videos, even like in junior high and high school. I was not good at skateboarding, but my friends were so I was the camera guy. I also went to a performing arts high school where I took film and TV classes. In grade 9 or 10, I got to see a Federico Fellini film for the first time. Straight up super privileged by being immersed in an art world where it's like instead of having to do a shop class, it was like: "here's a video camera, go make movies and watch like Stanley Kubrick films, and learn how to edit and make films." After high school I started going to Fava, the film and video arts coop in Edmonton. I took a 16 mm filmmaking class and that propelled everything even further because I was using celluloid film and learning about how to cut things analog, on a Steenbeck. That is what carried me into making ôtênaw.

Jackson: You mentioned Fellini and Kubrick. What have the changing influences on your creative practice been as you've developed as a filmmaker?

McNally: I think those directors specifically exposed me to films that were different aesthetically in terms of the way they tell their stories. But I remember when I was in junior high and I saw a Kubrick film for the first time. I was just blown away by how composed everything was. I never thought about composition before that from an aesthetic standpoint. Then, as I learned more about filmmaking, and got introduced to more "socially conscious documentaries." I didn't really have the budget to do films like Kubrick or Fellini, of course. With documentary you kind of just can take a camera and start. Also, around that time I was getting into like NFB [National Film Board of Canada] films as well, and [the Abenaki filmmaker] Alanis Obomsawin. I eventually wrote a thesis looking at her films, Indigenous Resurgence, [6] [open endnotes in new window] and Fourth Cinema.

wâhkôtowin[7] embodies a Fourth Cinema ethic and vice versa. You know what I mean? Fourth Cinema was made by a Maori filmmaker [Barry Barclay], so I don't know what Maori world views specifically apply to that movement, but if you translate it to Cree and Métis contexts on the prairies, how I approach filmmaking is just more and more trying to like embody wâhkôtowin as a filmmaking ethic. It's super hard to do that because as an artist you want to have your own voice, but I feel like when you're making documentaries, you can't just take someone's story and just make it your own. At least that's my philosophy. I think from an Indigenous filmmaking standpoint, that's not the right way to do it.

Jackson: Your sense of composition comes out so strongly in the beautiful relationship that you have with the stories [nêhiyaw scholar] Dwayne [Donald] is telling. As a filmmaker, you have such a strong voice and perspective that's coming through in the film, even though Dwayne's story takes the center stage.



Dwayne Donald describing the history of the gravesite in pêhonan.

But before I ask you more about that, I'm wondering if you can contextualize Indigenous Resurgence as a political, theoretical, activist, movement; Fourth Cinema; and wâhkôtowin. I'm wondering if you could contextualize those ideas as you're thinking of them now: what the main tenants of these traditions might be, and the challenges of translating some of these influences into film and into filmmaking.

McNally: Scholars like Taiaiake Alfred, Glenn Coulthard, and Leanne Simpson were theorizing notions of Indigenous Resurgence which were about bringing back language and culture, pushing them into the colonial present as the way of embodying Indigenous ways of knowing. [8] Now that I look back at it though, I just don't know if I necessarily agree with it as much now. I'm a little bit more pessimistic about overthrowing the State [laughs]; and also, I just think maybe a lot of that resurgence work was always happening. Idle No More seemed to blow things up, but I think a lot the activity that it drew attention to was always there before. Especially with Alanis Obamsawin's's films like *Incident at Restigouche* (1984)—which was sort of like a protest film relating to like fishing and treaty rights in Quebec—then *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993). [Image 26]





Opening shot from Obomsawin's *Incident* at Restigouche.

Land defense barricade from Obamsawin's *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance.*

Barry Barkley is a Maori filmmaker that coined the term Fourth Cinema. For me, it's like Indigenous Cinema. So, you know, the First Cinemas could be like Hollywood cinema; Second Cinema could be like French New Wave, Godard kind of stuff; Third Cinema is like a more Marxist cinema, which readers maybe of this journal will be more familiar with. A lot of that came from Argentina and Uruguay. A famous example is *La hora de la hornos* (1968). And then Barry Barkley was developing this idea of the Fourth Cinema which embodies the Fourth World. [Secwépemc activist and founder of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples] George Manuel coined the phrase the Fourth World to describe the Indigenous World. [9] When I read an essay Barkley wrote about a need for Fourth Cinema, he doesn't talk about documentary at all. [10] And my thinking was that you should be able to argue that documentary can be Fourth Cinema. That is the link to Alanis Obomsawin's films.

Jackson: One of the really interesting things to me about $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ is the way you center Indigenous thought and displace settler colonial assumptions. There's a moment in the film where Dwayne is telling the history of a certain part of the River Valley. He points up to the bank and mentions that there used to be a factory there, one that's gone now. To me, that displaces this idea of progressive modernity implicated in industrialization and colonization, as well as the types of



Still from Solanas and Getino's *La hora de la hornos*.



Archival still from *ôtênaw* picturing nêhiyaw camp on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River.



Marilyn Dumont picking berries, from McNally's short cinematic portrait of the poet.



Wheatpaste of Edmonton Oiler's star player, Conor McDavid from McNally's *McDavid*.

politics that might follow from organized labor. Yet in this moment in your film, we see that the river valley persists. The stories Dwayne is telling persist. All types of modes of life persist. It's actually the factory that has faded away. And I thought that displacement was really interesting, an example of, you know, Fourth Cinema as storytelling by Indigenous people for Indigenous people. There is a different sort of perspective on historical movement and time.

McNally: It's almost an off-handed comment for Dwayne, and he's making the point that we're still here: our stories are still being told right here. I think that's kind of his point, too, with the whole walk. It's like, yeah, here's Edmonton and one day Edmonton is going to be gone but these stories that he is telling will still be here. The river will still be able to tell a story, too.

Jackson: In the projects that you've worked on with folks like [Blackfoot Dene visual artist] Lauren Crazybull. You work with [the Cree rock band] nêhiyawak, who also work with [the Indigenous multidisciplinary music group] ag47; you've done short films with [Cree/Métis poet and educator] Marilyn Dumont and [Cree language educator] Reuben Quinn. It seems to me like you have a very robust Cree, Métis, Dene, Blackfoot, network of Indigenous artists that you belong to, which includes Dwayne. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about your relational practice: knowing different people working in different media, but oriented around the same constellations. How does collaboration and community inform $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$?

McNally I'm trying to think how best to get into that. With the score for $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$, meeting the guys from nêhiyawak, and having that all come together, that was like a lightning in a bottle moment. The recording for $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$'s score was the first thing they had done together as a group. [nêhiyawak vocalist and guitarist] Kris [Harper] and I met first, because I had heard a song of his and was trying to figure out music for the film, which wasn't done yet. I hadn't even started editing it. But I find I need to have some kind of temp track to edit to, musically—to try and build a flow and a rhythm. When we did link up, I showed them a bit of a rough cut down in Rossdale [a neighborhood in Edmonton] actually, in pêhonan, at the Ortona Armory. We talked a lot and then they recorded the score in a house Kris was renting which was also in Rossdale. All these things were kind of lining up. I'm not like a believer in fate. But, you know, a part of me still feels that it all worked out too well to be random.

As far as working with Lauren and, of course, Marilyn being involved with nêhiyawak's music, and Reuben Quinn as well, it's sort of a product of these networks, these webs of relations. I find myself working with people who are on the same page, philosophically or politically: we're kind of working towards something together and telling stories in a good way.

Rob: You brought up pêhonan[11] and how so many of these relationships like coalesced in this particular area of the River Valley. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to make a documentary about one of Dwayne's walks? And maybe about the importance, as you understand it, of, this section of the River Valley.

McNally: I have a degree from the Faculty of Native Studies [at the University of Alberta] and then in my last semester I was doing all these bullshit electives that I had to do to just like get a degree and someone was like, "Have you ever been on a walk with Dwayne?" And I didn't know who Dwayne was. So, I emailed Dwayne and found out when the next walk was. I had no intention of producing a film. I had no clue what I was in for, really. But I showed up for the walk and, of course, I was working on my [hockey player Connor] McDavid film at the time and so I had an Oilers hat on. Dwayne started making some jokes about the Oilers and my hat and we kind of bonded over hockey, hilariously, just our shared interest in hockey. [laughs]



Still from Fellini's 8 ½. The composition of this scene in particular resonates with the imagery from McNally's *McDavid*.



An obsessed fan before his shrine to the Edmonton Oiler's start player, Connor McDavid in McNally's *McDavid*.

On the walk I was just totally blown away, though maybe this doesn't happen to everybody that goes on the walks. Dwayne is an amazing storyteller and the stories he tells vary from walk to walk. His delivery probably varies as well from walk to walk. The walk was so magical. I felt like I learned more on this two hour walk than I did in my four-year degree. It felt really fresh to like get out of a theory book and get on the land, exercise a little bit, and just listen, just like listen to these stories. I got home and thought, "I got to make a movie about this."

I emailed him right away and he was so receptive. There was only one thing he said to me that changed the direction of the film. I asked if I could get some photos of him walking, because I thought the film would be kind of about him. But he just said: "This isn't about me." That really changed my world view in a lot of ways, honestly. [laughs] I think Western conventions of documentary often are, or totally can be, about a character; but this film is not about a character: it's about ideas and place.

That leads me to why the film is now free online. Anybody can watch this. The more people, the better. Thinking about things from an educational perspective is kind of humbling. There's lots of artists or arts communities can be really gated and kind of exclusive. I guess I'm trying to walk a fine line with this film. It's an art film but it's an educational art film.

Jackson: This film rewards the viewer the more times they watch it. It has a generosity, I would say that. It has many entry points for all types of different folks with all types of different interests while it pushes towards the importance of the stories and of the land that holds them. It makes me want to ask you about traditions of activist filmmaking that that you've referenced a little bit. Your film doesn't read immediately as a political documentary, yet you've referenced the shared politics you have with your collaborators. What happened to a way of thinking about politics for you when the politics could not be rendered through the story of a singular character?

McNally: When I was making *ôtênaw* I was wanting to be overtly political. Which is ironic because that's like the opposite of Dwayne's philosophy, even though—and this is just me talking, this isn't his words at all—but he wants stay out of politics and yet his walk is deeply political. Maybe it's a thing with Indigenous storytelling, specifically Cree storytelling in Cree territory, where it's just like: 'this shouldn't be political because this is like where we are and have always been." I can't remember who said this, but any kind of action from Indigenous people—and any kind of art—is going to be political. Because of the colonial othering of Indigenous people. In this context, I guess I want to be doing political stuff in my films but I don't want to be hitting people over the head by telling them it's

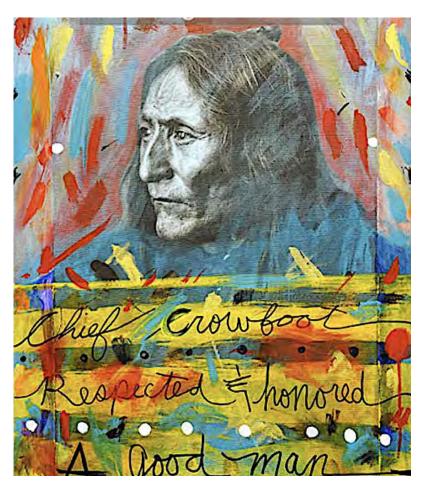
political. I want them to have to watch it a few times and they can formulate their own thoughts and opinions about it all.

Jackson: Leanne Simpson says something along the lines of like the opposite of colonization is not decolonization, but its building relations. [12] From time that I've spent with Dwayne and learning from his work and his teachings, that seems to resonate with how he thinks of colonialism, too. But there is still this idea that there are principles of governance, there are political principles in the stories he's telling and in the place that he's talking about. It's a different register of the political that that can't be told through familiar stories of an individual coming to consciousness and then struggling and overthrowing systems of domination. It adds a different tempo, a different register of legibility to what counts as collective memory and collective consciousness.



Still from McNally's *Maskwacis Education Schools Commission Celebration Video*.

McNally: That's exactly it. Even my growing body of work and the work I've been doing with the schools and in Maskwacis [the territory of the Ermineskin Cree Nation and the Samson Cree Nation reserves]. I'm not like telling people it's political stuff, because I'm just working on my own relations with the people with whom I'm working on these films. We're doing our own things and don't care if it's legible to outside viewers. Being a filmmaker is a very privileged position. It is 100% about visiting. I always feel a little bit sad when a film is over, because then the relationship changes a bit, you know. Of course when I was working on ôtênaw, I was in a lot more contact with Dwayne. Even the film I'm working on now with [Plains Cree painter and cultural worker] George Littlechild is about visiting. When he was last in town-before COVID 19-we just hung out for a couple of days together. I was driving him around everywhere and just hanging out. Yeah. I'm the luckiest person in the world because I just get to visit with people and make films. But people also come to trust me. Because of my past experiences and my growing body of work, people can trust me with their stories because they know I'm not going to manipulate them for commercial or even artistic gain. When I'm editing the films, I like to keep the people involved in the process. It slows the whole process down and makes it very, very frustrating sometimes because I have to relinquish the voice of the auteur. But the reality is if you want to make films in this way, you have to work with other people.



One of George Little Child's mixed media pieces, 2013.

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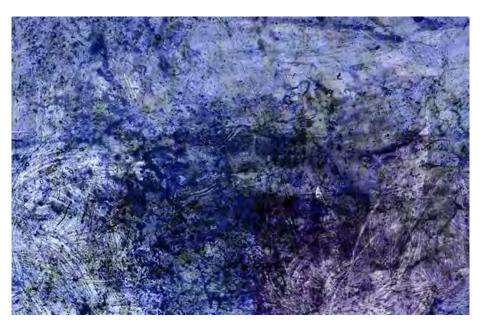
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Jackson: It sounds like there's an ethics and a politics in what you're describing: in the visiting and in building those relationships. This brings me to asking you some questions about aesthetics of the film as well. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of making it? And where these photographs came from and these brilliant abstractions?



McNally's painted 16mm stills capture the texture and depth of nêhiyaw relations to the land.

McNally: In the "Dogme 95 Manifesto" Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg create all these restrictions on what a filmmaker needed to conform to in order to be a part of the Dogme 95 movement.[13] [open endnotes in new window] Maybe it was when I read that, but I was really interested in how restrictions almost force creativity. So, in my decision to shoot a documentary on 16 mm film, especially a documentary that is a walk, it just seemed like such a challenge that there was a certain appeal to it.

There is the tactile nature of film. You open a film canister and it has a smell that is really chemical, But I love it. And I love like loading the film up. $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ was mostly shot on an Arri sr2 camera which was I think made in the 80s and early 90s. We also used a Bolex Wind-Up camera. Lindsay MacIntire, who's an Inuk filmmaker, shot a lot of the experimental multiple exposure parts of the film. I just sort of commissioned her and said: "Hey, Lindsay, I'm thinking abstract stuff, you know, here's a bunch of film and some money. Let's shoot some stuff." So, the film built on this. I was trying to bring these different elements together. As a result, the texture of film is really appealing to me. The graininess of it, and how the imperfections come through I think is really beautiful.



Still from Lindsay McIntyre's 2005 short film, not waving but drowning.

And then there is the archival imagery in the film. Honestly, I think this is one of the most problematic aspects of the film for me as I reflect on it. The archives are tricky. I didn't try and research whose families these pictures came from. The pictures are all from the Provincial Archives of Alberta or the City of Edmonton Archives, or the Glenbow. In hindsight, I wonder if I should have tried to seek out relations to these people featured in the photos. I did want to blend in these photographs because I think for viewers having these visual references is important. Like, locations in present-day Edmonton that not too long ago didn't resemble this place at all. Still, though, there are colonial buildings in some of the photos, but what you mostly see is a heavy, heavy Indigenous presence in the foreground of a lot of these shots. It's like I almost needed those illustrative elements to connect with the viewer. And then, finally, there's the slide films that I painted on 35 mm slides and digitally manipulated them. All of those elements relate to the layering that Dwayne talks about as a theme throughout the film: layers of history and layers of stories. I wanted to visually embody that.



Archival photograph of woman and child featured in ôtênaw.

Jackson: Visually, it's such a beautiful film. One of the things that the 16 mm does for me as a viewer is call into question the temporality of what's happening and when. It kind of blurs those lines of history— between the shots Lindsay was taking with the multiple exposures and the images you're getting of Dwayne's walk, and the images from the archive. It seems like you're up against the



Photograph by Josué Rivas depicting water protectors attacked with water canons by police at #NODAPL protests in 2016.



Heavily militarized police invading Wetsu'wet'en territories in 2018, captured in Unist'ot'en Camp's film *Invasion*.

challenge of the history of photography and its relationship to colonization. Photography is a technology of capture, quite literally. In my viewing, though, I think that this leads into the next question I want to ask. You have these photographs from the archive, and it's almost like you've set them in movement again or you reanimate them in relation to stories Dwayne is telling and the place that they were taken, in many cases. It prompts me to ask you about the relationship between movement and stillness in the film. When you're talking about composition and the layered stories Dwayne is telling, how do you think about the relationship between movement and stillness?

McNally: I mean, I was trying to build a rhythm in the film. Before the film was done, I had the music to work with. So, there was that interplay between what I'm hearing musically and the imagery that that I collected to use. I had all these elements and through editing with the music, that's when they kind of came together. To push it a bit further, of course, in relation to Dwayne's walk, a big part of that walk is that you're moving. You're walking. He talks about the river flowing and the speed of the river, too. But there's also a lot of moments in the walk where you're actually just sitting there listening to him and taking it all in. So, the rhythm of the film has formal a relationship to the walk in that way, too. I was trying to balance the movement and the stillness.

Jackson: This balance, this rhythm that you describe, comes through for me in the dreamlike quality of $\hat{o}t\hat{e}naw$ —a meditative mood the viewer is being invited into. Maybe to reference what you said earlier, the film is inviting the viewer in a way to visit with you. In a way, this focuses on interiority in the film. This visiting seems less about speaking back or against or protesting directly; it has a different order of politics, of aesthetics. As a white settler, when I think about so-called political Indigenous work, I've been trained to think about Kanehsatà:ke.[14] I've been trained to think about water protectors at Standing Rock[15] and the pipeline blockades in Wet'suwet'en[16]—a very particular vision of the "front lines." In a critical mode, this seems to me almost like a fetish of the concrete. But with the meditative, abstracted aspects of your film, you challenged me as a viewer to ask what this type of legibility demands of Indigenous activists, artists, and storytellers: the colonial demand to always have Indigenous people and artists always be in the service of strategies of anti-colonial resistance that a settler viewer could recognize.

McNally: Well, you know, it's funny. ôtênaw has played a number of times with the film You Are on Indian Land (dir. Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell, 1969), which is an older NFB film with an all-Native film crew. It's about like a blockade in the 60s. [17] Of course, it's happening in Mohawk land with the Mohawks. [The Montréal-based media arts organization] Cinema Politica were organizing these doubleheaders. I went to Montréal a number of years ago for one of the screenings. At the talk back afterwards, there was the family of Kahnteneta Horn, who was in the film as a younger woman. [18] All these Mohawks and then there was me it's: an urban Métis kid from the prairies. At the Q&A it was a Montreal, Concordia [University] crowd. I totally felt like I shouldn't have been there and like my film didn't belong at all because, like, their film was like really like cops versus Native people, fisticuffs, people getting arrested, like direct action. My film is just like about a guy walking in the forest along a river and that was such a weird feeling. I don't know what I'm trying to say with that. I just I felt like nobody there knew why ôtênaw was playing with it. It was almost like it was a bad pairing.

Jackson: As you look back on it, do you still think it's a bad pairing?

McNally: I'm so honored that the films have been paired together. It's a huge honor. Reflecting on it now, I just feel like no one really got what I was trying to lay down. This is not a knock against Concordia University, or Montreal, at all. It

just felt like nobody there understood what Dwayne and I were trying to do with this film. There are also just the differences between Cree and Mohawk ways of doing things, and differences between the settler contexts. The places just feel like worlds apart, you know what I mean? It's all "Indigenous cinema," but it's like they're worlds apart—in a lot of ways, philosophically—but also just like how things are done. It's weird thinking about that experience now. I just felt like when I was there, I did not belong. The audience wanted to hear the nitty gritty of the Mohawk struggle.

Jackson: As a Marxist scholar, I am learning from nêhiyaw thinkers like Sylvia McAdam, writing and learning from my colleague Mackenzie Ground who help me think about challenging the legibility of different forms of life and different forms of governance and relationship.[19] I think these are really challenging conversations to bring nuance to—to be honest with you—from the perspective of settler politics on the left. It's necessary but challenging to bring nuance to different aesthetic, philosophical, and relational traditions between and within different Indigenous nations.

But in the context of your film, and how to read your film, one of the big questions for me is: How do we read history? How do we read place? How do we read without prioritizing past over present over future? Your overlay images and double exposures really challenge audiences to think about the co-constitutive nature of these different temporal registers or time signatures without privileging one over the other. It feels as if it's not only about privileging the past, or centering the present, or imagining the future. But it's asking how these all relate to each other. I think your film aesthetically portrays that in ways that might be very difficult to do in language.

McNally: 100%. It's like I'm trying to subvert expectations. If people are thinking they're going to see a "political" 'Indigenous' film, they're going to be surprised. That's a big part of it. Sometimes that's what makes me frustrated when I see a Vice Media documentary or certain big institutional documentaries. I just feel like maybe they're catering to certain expectations. That's the beauty with ôtênaw, too, from my perspective. I received arts funding to make this film and it wasn't beholden to another producer or a studio. So, I could take as many creative liberties as I wanted and inadvertently subvert some of the viewer's expectations of what the film might be about and who it's for.



Still from the opening shots of ôtênaw.

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Notes

- 1. An orthodox Marxist stagism tends to suggest that the dialectics of class struggle advance more or less linearly through a series of stages: from the direct domination of pre-capitalist social relations, to the indirect domination of the market in industrial capitalism, to the concentration of the productive forces in a socialist state, before the market is dissolved in the final communist moment. Indigenous scholars—as well as many others—have critiqued this teleological theory of world history, emphasizing the white supremacy and Eurocentrism of its technological determinism. This critique is perhaps most forcibly articulated in the anthology *Marxism and Native Americans* (1982). On the role of colonial anthropology in this ideological operation see Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice,' and Colonial Citizenship" (2007) and Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969). [return to text]
- 2. As part of the young Canadian state's systematic wester expansion, Treaty 6 was an agreement entered into with Cree, Assiniboine, and Ojibwe leaders in 1876. Following the purchase of Rupert's Land—a large portion of the Northwestern prairie region of what is now Canada—from the Hudson Bay company in 1869, Indigenous nations faced pressures of colonial encroachment on their lands which included the genocide of the buffalo—a staple of the Indigenous plains economy. In the face of this political and economic shift, Indigenous people hesitantly agreed to negotiate treaty in an attempt to protect their sovereignty and quality of life. The agreement included provisions for food, the distribution of wealth, land agreements, medical care, and education.

Dominant colonial accounts of treaty tend to characterize the relationship as a land transaction in which Indigenous nations ceded their land to the Crown in exchange for a bundle of rights and protections from the state. Indigenous accounts of treaty, however, root the treaty making process in Indigenous protocols of diplomacy and emphasize treaty as a relationship of mutual respect, non-interference, and material reciprocity. Indigenous leaders who resisted the treaty making process were criminalized, incarcerated, and cast as enemies of the state. For succinct accounts of the treaty making process from a nêhiyaw perspective see Sharon Venne, "Treaties Made in Good Faith"; for the role of criminalization and dispossession in the treaty making process see Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark's "Criminal Empire: The Making of the Savage in a Lawless Land."

- 3. For detailed analysis of this position see Venne "Treaties Made in Good Faith."
- 4. For a concise account of this position see Snelgrove, "Treaty and the Problem of Colonial Reification" (2022)
- 5. Organizers of Pekiwewin chose the name because of its resonance with the politics of return. In nêhiyawewin, Pekiwewin translates loosely to the act of coming home. Many of the residents of the camp were displaced and unhoused Indigenous people for whom the particular location of the camp had powerful

spiritual and political resonance.

6. Indigenous resurgence is a movement of Indigenous political and social thought that centers on the reclamation of Indigenous modes of being in the world and organizing social relationships. Rather than focusing on an oppositional politics of anti-colonialism, Indigenous resurgence roots decolonization in every day practices of reviving Indigenous forms of life. Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel describes the pulse of resurgence this way:

"Being Indigenous today means struggling to reclaim and regenerate one's relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing, destructive forces of colonization. Whether through ceremony or through other ways that Indigenous peoples (re)connect to the natural world, processes of resurgence are often contentious and reflect the spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political scope of the struggle." (88)

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- 7. wâhkôtowin is a nêhiyaw concept for describing the spiritual and material interrelatedness of all forms of human and more than human life. In nêhiyaw thought, wâhkôtowin is both an ethic and a law governing personal and political relationships. For detailed descriptions of wâhkôtowin's role in nêhiyaw social forms see Harold Cardinal and Walter Hilderbrant's *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*.
- 8. See Taiaikae Alfred, *Wásase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom;* Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks*; Leanne Simpson *Dancing on our Turtles Back* and *As We Have Always Done.*
- 9 See George Manuel's The Fourth World: An Indian Reality.
- 10. See Barclay, "Celebrating Fourth Cinema"
- 11. pêhonan is a nêhiyaw that Donald translates roughly to "meeting place." In the context of Donald's teachings and McNally's film, pêhonan references the flats across the river from what was historically Fort Edmonton, now the Alberta Legislature.
- 12. As We Have Always Done, 43.
- 13. Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, "The Vow of Chastity: Dogme Manifesto." Copenhagen, March 13, 1995. https://ifsstech.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/the_vow_of_chastity.pdf. [return to page 3]
- 14. Kanehsatà:ke is a Mohawk settlement in Southern. In 1990, was a site of 78-day armed standoff between land defenders and Quebec police, RCMP, and the Canadian Army.
- 15. In 2016, Water Protectors in Standing South Sioux Reservation in South Dakota defended their lands and waters against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The struggle was one of the most intense sites of frontline of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles in the United States since the 1970s.
- 16. Located in Northern British Columbia, Wetsu'wet'en nation is engaged in a protracted struggle against multiple pipeline projects supported by the Canadian government. The Wetsu'we'ten people and their comrades struggle against militarized police violence as they defend their lands.
- 17. Released in 1969, this short documentary was one of the most influential and widely distributed productions made by the Indian Film Crew (IFC), the first all-

Indigenous unit at the NFB. It documents a 1969 protest by the Kanien'kéhaka (Mohawk) of Akwesasne, a territory that straddles the Canada–U.S. border.

18. Kahnteneta Horn was a Mohawk political activist who was active in the Red Power and American Indian Movement.

19. See McAdam, Nationhood Interrupted.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA





Drug queen and film investor Amara de Escalones (Lidia Porto) threatens a rival and visits the film's set, supposedly located in Nevada but filmed in New Mexico (*Get Shorty,* season 1).





In the acknowledgements for Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II, Cedric J. Robinson recognizes his

Contemporary television and racial capitalism in place

by Curtis Marez

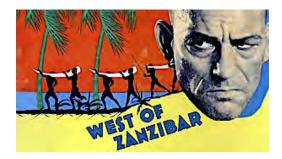
Get Shorty (Epix, 2017-19), a TV program inspired by the Elmore Leonard novel of the same name, presents a meta-reflection on the process of media making in impoverished places. Season one deals with Amara de Escalones (Lidia Porto), a ruthless Guatemalan casino boss and drug trafficker in Puyallup, Nevada, who launders money by investing in a movie. Episode 8, "Shooting on Location," depicts the production of *The Admiral's Mistress*, an English period romance. Amara convinces the studio to film in Puyallup by providing armed Latinx gangsters to do free labor on set. With a penchant for animal prints and sharp red nails, Amara sleeps with and often murders her partners in crime. For example, she beds and then murders the owner of a water park where she launders money before forcing herself on the terrified director of *The Admiral's Mistress*. While *Get Shorty* also depicts a studio head who defrauds insurance companies, Amara represents a kind of racialized and gendered terror that makes Hollywood's transgressions pale by comparison.

Although set in Nevada, "Shooting on Location" was filmed on a backlot in Albuquerque to take advantage of state subsidies. The local tax incentive program in New Mexico—a poor state of mostly Mexican and Native American people—effectively diverts taxes from social welfare to media industries in Los Angeles. Hollywood promises more jobs and more spending on local businesses, but data suggests that such benefits are minimal compared to profits. TV producers redistribute wealth upwards in ways that seem unethical if not criminal but *Get Shorty*'s racist and sexist representation of Amara distracts from the local production context and Hollywood's complicity in the theft of public resources.

Get Shorty exemplifies my claim in this essay that the content and production process of TV shows made in poor parts of the United States constitute powerful, interrelated forms of racial capitalism. Cedric J. Robinson introduced the concept of racial capitalism in Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition (1983), where he argued that capitalism is inextricably fused with racism. "Racial capitalism," Robinson writes, means that "as a material force," racism "permeate[s] the social structures emergent from capitalism." As such, both "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society" and its corresponding "social ideology" have historically "pursued essentially racial directions."[1] [open endnotes in new wondow] Racial capitalism, in other words, combines systems of racialized theft and labor exploitation with the production and dissemination of the racist representations that support them.

While Robinson's ideas have been influential in Black studies, ethnic studies, and American studies, they have been underappreciated in media studies, even though he subsequently elaborated his theory of racial capitalism in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film*

mother, Clara Whiteside Dyson, who took him to Oakland's Grand Lake Theater to see the 1947 rerelease of *Bambi*. A film of natal alienation, in *Bambi* a hunter kills the titular boy fawn's mother and later returns and burns down his forest home.



West of Zanzibar (Todd Browning, 1928) depicts African ivory porters who were played by Black extras from South Central Los Angeles.



TV programs made in New Mexico are subsidized by tax incentives and other public subsidies. In 2018 Netflix purchased Albuquerque Studios (where *Breaking Bad* and other shows were filmed) for a fraction of its worth, in part because of a \$14.5 million contribution from the state and the city of Albuquerque.

Before World War II (2007).[2] In this book, Robinson argues that racist movies justify the exploitation of workers of color and encourage racism among white workers. Racism historically precluded interracial solidarity and promoted forms of white supremacy as a psychic compensation for class differences among white people. Pictures vilifying people of color further normalize the disciplining of Black and Latinx labor and encourage white racism to the benefit of finance capitalists invested in the film industry.[3]

In his discussion of jungle films from the late 1920s and 1930s, for example, Robinson suggests that Hollywood is itself an industry of racial capitalism that intermixes racial inequalities in both representation and production. Jungle pictures helped legitimate the exploitation of workers in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, but also, he implies, in Black Los Angeles. Robinson cites a 1929 article published in Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life about the thousands of Black extras employed to play Africans, Asians, and Pacific Island "savages." They were recruited from South Central Los Angeles to work across town in Culver City, where the all-white studios were located. [4] Like other municipalities in greater Los Angeles, racially restrictive covenants were common in Culver City, and local police had a reputation for racist harassment. It was also home to many members of the Ku Klux Klan. At the same time as they faced possible racist violence, Black extras were often required to perform extreme physical feats in unsafe conditions and to participate in racist representations conditions that inspired sit-down strikes and other labor actions.[5] Black extras played disposable African diamond miners (Diamond Handcuffs, 1928) and ivory porters (West of Zanzibar, 1928). Although attention to place is implicit in Robinson's materialist perspective, his discussion of jungle movies is the rare example where he considers Hollywood's local context of racialized labor exploitation. In this way, he connects film content rationalizing the exploitation of African workers to a local mode of production partly based in the exploitation of African American workers.

Similar claims can be made about the relationship between movies about Mexicans and the exploitation of Mexican workers in Southern California. During the first three decades of its twentieth century history, Los Angeles depended on Mexican labor to build and maintain rail lines; construct the homes driving regional real estate speculation; harvest and pack citrus and other crops; and tend the region's lawns and gardens. Mexicans were also subject to segregation (including restrictive covenants) and police and vigilante violence. Hollywood employed a small number as extras, but only the whitest Mexican actors received credited roles. In response to the perceived threat of Mexican revolutionaries in Los Angeles, and with the advent of sound technologies, filmmaking became an indoor industry by the 1930s as studios were increasingly walled off from surrounding Mexican social spaces and employed their own private police forces. The many silent and early sound movies about Mexican bandits symbolically consolidated anti-Mexican whiteness and disciplined the Mexican workers on whom Hollywood still depends.[6]

To extrapolate from *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning,* Hollywood not only made movies that celebrated a Jim Crow/Juan Crow racial regime on behalf of other industries. Significantly, the film industry itself also constituted a dominant form of what I call *racial capitalism in place* through its occupation of material spaces and its exploitation of racialized labor, combined with its racist narratives. If "racial capitalism" names capitalism's development in racial directions, "racial capitalism in place" describes those developments locally, in places where media are made.





Albuquerque Studios includes multiple production offices, nine soundstages and two backlots, and it occupies a large tract of land next to Isleta Pueblo, home to the Isleta Resort and Casino, the location for Jesse Pinkman's stint in rehab at the end of season 2 and beginning of season 3 of *Breaking Bad*.





The producers of *Preacher* built a set representing a Texas church on an Albuquerque Studios backlot, the ruins of which are visible behind a chain link fence surrounded by rat traps.

Albuquerque Studios is part of a larger planned community called Mesa del Sol, which includes a K-12 charter school, a fitness club, a café, a dog park, and a Baptist church, which has incorporated into its logo the Zia Pueblo sun symbol but with stained glass replacing the sun. According to its website, the church supports missionary work among Diné people in northern Arizona.

In this essay, I elaborate a theory of "racial capitalism in place" based on contemporary TV shows shot in New Mexico and Georgia to take advantage of local tax incentives and other state subsidies. New Mexico offers a 25% tax incentive for production and post-production costs (excluding above the line workers), with an additional 5% for TV shows and for productions using local facilities. [7] New Mexico's incentive program paid out more than \$83 million in 2021, during the Covid 19 pandemic. [8] Georgia also offers a 30% tax incentive,



The Sunday I visited the church, one parishioner's car sported a union bumper sticker promoting filmmaking in New Mexico that also included a version of the Pueblo's sun symbol in the logo for the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE), Hollywood's historically conservative craft union.

including costs for actors, writers, directors and show runners—in other words, the most privileged media workers. In the same pandemic year, Georgia's incentives totaled \$870 million even while the state cut funding for public education by almost a billion.[9] Georgia and New Mexico further attract media makers by providing public lands at significantly reduced rates for the building of soundstages and related facilities, and by subsidizing infrastructures such as roads.[10]

Georgia and New Mexico are relatively poor states with large Indigenous, Black, and people of color populations, exemplifying extreme forms of historic and ongoing structural inequality. Indigenous people and people of color are overrepresented in low wage work in the two states, a situation with origins in colonial and plantation histories. TV productions in Georgia and New Mexico indirectly benefit from low labor costs in service and agricultural sectors but employ relatively few local workers themselves. Officials promote tax credits for media production with arguments about the benefits of local employment, although the numbers are small relative to the total profits for wealthy TV producers from out of state. As Ryan Millsap, president of Blackhall Studios in the Atlanta area, explained to a local reporter,

"We're taking movies that were conceived in LA, funded in LA, and then shipped to Georgia for manufacturing. Then they're brought back to LA for distribution [and] then all the money stays in Los Angeles after the movie's made." [11]

In fact, research demonstrates that the effect on local economic growth is negligible or even negative.[12] Incentives drawing production to these states thus largely result in the upward redistribution of wealth from poor people of color to Hollywood.





Mesa del Sol homes resemble the "Spanish" and "Pueblo" style suburban houses featured in *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, where the appropriation of Mexican and Indigenous architectural styles complements the theft of land and exploitation of labor in New Mexico's past and present. Soundstages are visible in both photos, between the faux adobe homes and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the distance.

Our current historical moment is marked by anti-Black police violence and Black Lives Matter; the theft and despoiling of Indigenous land and the Dakota Pipeline protests; and Latin American migration to the United States, spurred by the U.S. war on drugs and the cartels it helped make possible. The contemporary neoliberal racial regime remains anchored in racial violence, extractive industries,

and racialized labor exploitation in the United States and the rest of the world. Like previous forms of capitalism—including the early 20th century finance capitalism studied by Robinson—neoliberal capitalism is inextricably fused with racism and related forms of pathologization that serve to differentiate and discipline workers—but there's a new twist. Film and TV racial capitalism is funded by public money.

The contemporary diversion of tax dollars from the racialized poor to the Hollywood entertainment industry exemplifies neoliberalism as a novel development in the history of racial capitalism in place. Meanwhile, program content complements such developments by demonizing people of color and representing racialized poverty and violence as attractive, entertaining, and desirable. Such representations both justify a status quo of inequality and disavow Hollywood's participation in it. Media corporations in this way "launder" public money appropriated from Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people by converting this money into TV spectacles, from crime drama to horror to science fiction. And, as I argue, building on Robinson's account of early cinema, even recent programs that seem to challenge white supremacy can nonetheless promote racial capitalism.









The studios around Atlanta are even larger and more sumptuous than in Albuquerque. In 2020 Trilith Studios, formerly Pinewood Studios (where the *Avengers* movies were made), expanded into a 935-acre development that includes filmmaking facilities and a 235-acre "European" town with homes, restaurants, shops, parks, schools, a fitness center, and a spa. The images here are from the Trilith website, where their motto is "It Takes Imagination to Be Different."



Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk) appropriates equipment from a public university to film a TV commercial.

Laundering racial capitalism: crime TV

Made in New Mexico, *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13) deals with a white high school chemistry teacher, Walter White, who turns to manufacturing meth, ultimately outsmarting both a Mexican cartel and a gang of neo-Nazis. In recognition of the program's footprint in New Mexico, when the state legislature expanded its tax incentive program, it passed the "Breaking Bad Bill." [13] Also produced in New Mexico, *Better Call Saul* (AMC, 2015-2022) is a *Breaking Bad* prequel representing an ethically challenged but appealing white lawyer named Jimmy McGill. Over time, McGill changes his name and becomes the unscrupulous Saul Goodman, who wages a battle of wits with Mexican drug dealers.

Breaking Bad and Better Call Saul have been lauded for contributing to the New Mexican economy, but they've employed relatively few local workers, making the







McGill gives a Mexican worker (Eddie J. Fernandez) a hand as part of a PR stunt in season one of *Better Call Saul*. The billboard used in the scene is off Interstate Highway 25 in Albuquerque, next to a community college. This section of the highway is dotted with billboards for lawyers offering their services to people suffering workplace injuries.

state incentive program seem like one of Saul Goodman's schemes. [14] The first season comes perilously close to admitting as much. In one scene, McGill shoots a TV commercial with the help of film students and using equipment borrowed from the University of New Mexico. McGill's commandeering of media-making resources from a public university stands in for the program's reliance on tax dollars. Since like the show itself, McGill appropriates public resources, *Better Call Saul* seems to allegorize the conditions of its own production.

Also in this episode, the lawyer has been forced by a rival to remove a billboard promoting his practice. McGill sets up the shot on location for his commercial while a Mexican worker (stuntman Eddie J. Fernandez) is seen in the background taking the billboard down. As McGill looks into the camera and explains the injustice of the removal order, the worker falls from the billboard platform and hangs by a rope over the Albuquerque skyline. Scaling the billboard, McGill rushes to rescue the man, who complains "took you long enough" as the lawyer hands him some cash for his role in the public relations stunt. The scene inadvertently implies that TV producers who promise to lend a hand to local workers are also partly PR scammers. Or better yet, in their mode of production, *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* are symbolic money launderers, "cleaning" assets stripped from Indigenous and Mexican people and turning them into TV shows.[15]

The connection between TV production and the shady appropriation of public resources is most directly represented in Better Call Saul, where McGill forms "Saul Goodman Productions" and employs UNM film students and equipment to make TV commercials for local businesses and for his own law practice (season 2, 3, and 5). Under McGill's direction, the students also use "borrowed" university equipment in another PR stunt (the filming of a ceremony naming a university library after his late brother to influence the state bar), and to produce incriminating images to foil another lawyer (season 4 and 6). In most of his film projects, McGill uses deception to access public filming locations for free, including a military base, a high school, a courtroom building, and a UNM quad. Over the course of six seasons his commercials come to define his life of greed. The first episode of season one begins with McGill nostalgically watching one of his commercials while in hiding in Omaha, and the penultimate episode of seasons six ends when one of his elderly marks (Carol Burnett) discovers the commercial on the internet and calls the authorities. Finally, the show's title sequence mimics McGill's cheap commercials with grainy video images that increasingly degrade over the course of the show, suggesting the protagonist's moral descent while seemingly identifying Sony Pictures (Better Call Saul's production company) with thieving Saul Goodman Productions.

The two shows disavow TV production as money laundering, however, with stereotypical representations of racialized criminality. Both programs include working-class Mexican and Indigenous people as backgrounds in crime and court scenes, while a handful of such actors have larger roles as drug dealers and cartel hit men. They give a few Latinx characters backstories that explain how they became criminals (notably Gus Fring in *Breaking Bad* and Nacho in *Better Call Saul*), but for the most part, brown violence and criminality are assumed as a given and represented as static and unchanging. The show's most significant representations of Mexican workers are thus as inherently violent criminals, especially grinning psychopaths such as Tuco (Raymond Cruz) and Lalo Salamanca (Tony Dalton).





Breaking Bad naturalizes Latinx criminality with a rogue's gallery of terrifying narcos, starting with Hector Salamanca (Mark Margolis), seen here in a flashback after almost drowning his young nephew to teach the lesson "familia es todo" (season 3, episode 7).

Hector's nephew Tuco Salamanca, is a gold-grill-wearing sociopath who puts cigarettes out on his tongue (Raymond Cruz, season 1, episode 6).





Hector's other nephews, twins Leonel and Marco Salamanca (Daniel Mocada and Luis Mocada), are here pictured decapitating Tortuga (Danny Trejo) with a machete (season 3, episode 3).

Those characters reappear in *Better Call Saul*, with the addition of Hector's nephew Lalo Salamanca (Tony Dalton), shown here menacing the program's protagonists, a gun in his waistband (season 5, episode 10).

By contrast, Walter White and Jimmy McGill are depicted as slipping into crime over time and seemingly against type. Although the programs' white protagonists become reprehensible (Walter White especially so), they nonetheless have family and friends they care for and who care for them; despite their flaws, the main characters are depicted as compelling (if not always attractive) anti-heroes. What is more, both men are excellent at their jobs. White is a meticulous craftsman of meth, producing a purer product than his Mexican rivals and ultimately triumphing over Fring, the Afro-Latinx evil genius of the drug world. Similarly, McGill is a brilliant tactician who outsmarts his rivals, both legal and criminal. White and McGill are thus represented as superior to the shows' Mexican narcos; the narrative hierarchy between major and minor characters parallels the kinds of hierarchical distinctions between white workers and workers of color in early cinema analyzed by Robinson.[16]

With their depictions of superior white workers and inferior, inherently violent Mexican workers, *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* naturalize racialized criminality. From that vantage point, Mexican criminals are born rather than a product of racial capitalism. While both programs promise to bring jobs to New Mexico, they instead bring the ideological infrastructure that supports racialized policing, criminalization, and carceral state violence.[17] The shows thus participate in racial capitalism through a mix of production practices and ideological representations, accumulation by racialized dispossession, and TV narratives that legitimate racialized criminalization, imprisonment, and detention.





Black, Indigenous and Mexican people appear in the background of courtroom scenes in Better Call Saul.





Better Call Saul also represents Mexicans as criminals in the foreground of desert landscape shots.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA







Preacher's first season (2016) obliquely represents racial capitalism in scenes where the villainous cattle baron Odin Quincannon (Jackie Earl Haley) displaces a Mexican couple and destroys their home.



Speculative racial capitalism: horror and science fiction TV

Whereas crime dramas draw on long histories of racializing illegality in popular culture, including the silent Mexican bandit movies referenced in the introduction, we might expect contemporary speculative TV genres such as horror and science fiction to represent race more critically. Indeed, recent speculative television programs have been acclaimed by critics for their incorporation of antiracist themes and plotlines. Preacher (AMC, 2016-19), Watchmen (HBO, 2020), and Lovecraft Country (HBO, 2020), for example, incorporate speculative elements in anti-racist ways. The shows indirectly reference the terrors of poverty, inequality, and asset stripping, or what Clyde Woods referred to as all the "tricks and traps" poor Black and Latinx people face in the neo-plantation economy of Louisiana, as well as, I would add, in the distinct but related contexts of Georgia and New Mexico. [18] [open endnotes in new window] At the same time, however, these programs disavow the material inequalities on which their speculative fictions depend. While not expressly racist—and in fact including anti-racist plots and characters—Preacher, Watchmen and Lovecraft Country nonetheless deny their participation in racial capitalism by dissimulating the specific geographic and economic conditions of their production. In fact, it is perhaps their anti-racist representations that enable the material violence of racial capitalism in place to be concealed.

Season 1 of *Preacher*, filmed in and around Albuquerque, features a brooding minister named Jessie Custer (Dominic Cooper) as the titular preacher in the fictional town of Annville, Texas, where he battles evil both human and supernatural, alongside his lover Tulip (Ruth Negga) and his vampire friend Cassidy (Joe Gilgun). Preacher diversifies its source material by casting a Black actor as Tulip, who is an Anglo character in the graphic novel on which the show is based. The program also presents critical perspectives on factory farming, represented by the Quincannon Meat and Power Company, owned by the odious villain of season 1, Odin Quincannon. In one episode, he displaces a Mexican couple, bulldozes their farmhouse, and turns their land into pasture. Quincannon is also pictured building elaborate models of the Alamo in his office while enjoying the sounds of the slaughterhouse on an intercom and holding a baby made from ground beef stuffed into a toddler's jumper. Through the figure of Quincannon, the show's evocations of frontier violence, land dispossession, and U.S. empire exemplify its implicit indictment of racial capitalism on the register of narrative content, with the character's sadistic rapacity figured as even more monstrous than *Preacher's* vampires and demons.

But the progressive potential of *Preacher* is undermined by the pleasure the program encourages viewers to take in scenes of spectacular violence that revel in the grittiness of the show's impoverished location. Many such scenes are set in the Sundowner Motel, which also gives its name to episode five of season 1. In one scene, for example, two angels track Jesse to the seedy motel where they are followed by a third angel who attacks them. The angels are immortal so, as they shoot, stab, and club each other to death, they are reincarnated in new bodies and the battle continues at the corpses pile up. These scenes are filmed at the actual Sundowner Motel on Albuquerque's Central Avenue. As the name indicates,





Preacher shot extreme scenes of body horror at Albuquerque's Sundowner Motel, located in a poor Indigenous, Black, and Mexican neighborhood.

Central Avenue was once a prosperous street, a stretch of Route 66 that ran the length of the city and featured numerous restaurants, motels, and tourist attractions. But it fell on hard times when Route 66 was superseded by Highway 40. While parts of it remain relatively prosperous, Central Avenue's southeast portion, where *Preacher* was shot, is filled with boarded up businesses and desperately poor Indigenous, Mexican, and Black residents.

Preparing to visit the area recently, I packed a camera, but when I got there, it felt wrong to take pictures; the prospect struck me as a kind of extractive voyeurism that echoed TV's racial capitalist aesthetic. But that doesn't seem to have troubled the producers of *Preacher*, who used tax dollars to shoot voyeuristic, slumming scenes of body horror at the Sundowner where the asset stripping and racialized labor exploitation that help make such programs possible are an implicit—but invisible—background to the show's supernatural violence. Audiences are called upon to enjoy such representations of spectacular violence while shielded from knowledge of the more quotidian violence of Hollywood's neoliberal racial capitalism in place and the theft and exploitation it organizes.

Preacher's concluding scenes of apocalyptic violence spark a similar interpretation. The methane produced by Quincannon's cattle explodes in the final episode of season one, destroying Annville and killing all its inhabitants except for Jessie, Tulip, and Cassidy.









Representing in displaced form the program's abandonment of Estancia, New Mexico, in *Preacher*'s season 1 finale, a methane reactor explodes, leveling the town and killing its inhabitants as the show's three protagonists speed away from the destruction.

For the next two seasons the series moved both its setting and shooting location to Louisiana, and the three protagonists never mourn and hardly think about the town and the death of their friends and neighbors. The season one finale ends with images of genocide partly produced in an impoverished location. The establishing shots depicting Annville were filmed in the small New Mexican village of Estancia. Most of the local businesses depicted are closed, and their incorporation in the program aestheticizes rural poverty.









Establishing shots for *Preacher's* fictional Texas setting were filmed in Estancia, New Mexico. Like other programs discussed in this essay, *Preacher* aestheticizes racial capitalism by making poverty look attractive and desirable.

Shows shot in precarious places often depend on the existence of "picturesque" poverty in locations where Indigenous people and people of color live. Estancia is over 50% Latinx, with more than 25% of its population living below poverty (almost twice the national average). The largest employer is a private prison that detains migrants from Mexico and Central America on behalf of ICE. While Estancia's tax dollars subsidize media production in the state, there are no signs of trickle-down benefits for its residents.[19] Although *Preacher* aligns itself with diversity, Annville's fate brings into sharp relief the local impact of New Mexico's tax incentive program, which provides an extra 5% "Uplift Zone" incentive for shooting in rural areas. The show renders Annville and its inhabitants disposable, while its protagonists move on and live on. The diegesis thus anticipates how *Preacher* lived on, moving to New Orleans while abandoning Estancia, disposing of the village and its people.

I conclude with the example of two speculative programs produced in Georgia which, in their content, are explicitly anti-racist. *Watchmen* creates an alternative reality that reflects critically on our own, a world where the police and the KKK are effectively the same institution. It also presents a compelling origin story for Black resistance in the form of Hooded Justice and Sister Night, two masked Black avengers.







Watchmen presents utopian images of Black women and mobility. The premier episode features Angela Abar (Regina King) dressed as Sister Night and driving a black muscle car past the Williams Dreamland Theater (destroyed in the Greenwood massacre but rebuilt in Watchmen's alternative reality), to a trailer park called "Nixonville" where she punches a Klansman in the face

As Rebecca A. Wanzo notes,

"Watchmen imagines a redemptive narrative for superhero origins, both by writing a black man into the origin story and by making state-ignored (and state-generated) white supremacy the enemy." [20]

Lovecraft Country is a supernatural horror show about several generations of Black people in the 1950s who not only face quotidian forms of racism, including police and vigilante violence, but also a network of white supremacist magicians. Lovecraft Country is also "redemptive," not only because it revises the notoriously racist works of H.P. Lovecraft, but also because it represents, via the convention of time-travel portals, fantastic forms of Black feminist mobility in opposition to Jim Crow.





In the context of patriarchal Jim Crow, Lovecraft Country's Hippolyta Freeman (Aunjanue Ellis) longs for freedom of movement, represented by her own driving and her encounter with a motorcycle riding Black woman. Freeman gets her wish for greater freedom of movement when she falls into a time traveling portal which transports her into space.



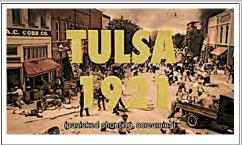


In 1920s Paris she becomes one of Josephine Bakers' dancers.

Finally, in Africa, she leads a group of warrior women in battle against Confederate soldiers

Both programs were partly made in Georgia to take advantage of the state's incentive program. Both also recreated the 1921 Greenwood Massacre in which

white racists attacked the prosperous Black neighborhood of Tulsa, murdering over 300 people, looting, and burning businesses, churches, schools, and homes. *Watchmen* used the old downtown of Cedartown and a historic theater in Macon to represent Greenwood, while *Lovecraft Country* also filmed episodes in Macon.





Watchmen's recreation of the Greenwood Massacre in Tulsa Oklahoma was filmed in two Georgia locations, Macon and, as pictured here, Cedartown.

Watchmen includes scenes of white looting, as in this image of looters taking a piano from the Dreamland Theater. The scenes of looting represent a critical rejoinder to contemporary right-wing moral panics over Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and charges of rioting and looting.

Cedartown is home to a marble statue depicting a 10-foot-tall, generic Confederate soldier holding a rifle atop a tall pedestal and shaft standing between the town's two courthouse buildings, just a few blocks from the *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* locations. Meanwhile, the shows' Macon scenes were also shot next to a "Monument to the Women of the Confederacy" and another "pedestal-shaft-soldier" memorial.

Such memorials were erected in two waves: around the turn of the 19th century, as complements to Jim Crow, and during the late 1950s and early 1960s, in response to the African American civil rights movement. [21]





Lovecraft Country also filmed its recreation of the Greenwood Massacre in Macon and includes scenes of white looting.

Unlike *Watchmen*, *Lovecraft Country* represents Black life in Greenwood before the massacre.





Lovecraft Country also depicts armed Black resistance.

Historically, then, we can read the monuments as symbolically reasserting racialized labor discipline at moments when dominant racial regimes were threatened. A similar conclusion is suggested by the present moment, when the









Macon's Confederate monument is prominently featured in *Lovecraft Country*'s depiction of the Greenwood Massacre. At the base of the Confederate memorial white supremacists attack a group of Black youth and Atticus (Jonathan Majors) travels from the future to protect them.

same state government supporting Georgia's media incentive program also passed legislation protecting Confederate monuments. In April 2019, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed SB 77 protecting memorials to the Confederate States of America. [22] One of the bill's co-sponsors was Republican Representative Bill Heath of the 31st district, which includes Cedartown, where *Watchmen*'s depiction of the Greenwood Massacre was shot.

What are we to make of the fact that two of the contemporary TV programs most acclaimed for their anti-racist stories were subsidized by assets that a white nationalist state government stripped from poor people of color? Watchmen cuts the memorials out of the frame, but Lovecraft Country uses Macon's Confederate monument to anchor scenes where white supremacists attack two young queer Black men and one of the show's time-traveling Black protagonists, Atticus Finch (Jonathan Majors), comes to their defense. While in their content Watchmen and Lovecraft County oppose racism, in their mode of production they benefit from the racial capitalism that calls to preserve Confederate memorials enforce. Scenes of white characters looting Black neighborhoods suggest comparison to the less direct and more diffuse forms of violence represented by state incentive programs. This is to say that the shows' anti-racist content indirectly references yet ultimately displaces from view and critical reflection the intersecting race and class inequalities in their filming locations. By helping to deny the programs' participation in the upward redistribution of wealth from poor Georgians of color to Hollywood, the anti-racism of Watchmen and Lovecraft Country also helps encourage other shows to film there. One sign of this denial's effectiveness is the fact that while regional news stories and local boosters celebrate Georgia's media incentive program, they never draw connections between what's on screen and the places where it was made. These final examples thus indicate the need to elaborate Robinson's analysis for the study of anti-racist media that reinforces racial capitalism.

His Forgeries of Memory and Meaning helps us understand the relation between Hollywood's progressive representations of race on the one hand and its accumulation by racial capitalism on the other. Writing about Black-made "uplift" or "race" movies (1910-1930), Robinson argues that although some scholars have read them as opposing mainstream anti-Black representations, most such works "exploited Black caricatures for the amusement of their largely Black audiences." [23] The predominance of comedies over melodramas partly reflected the preferences of white exhibitors for caricatures of Black people. According to Robinson, during the 1920s, white businessmen, recognizing a lucrative investment, began to buy Black-owned theaters and build new ones in Black neighborhoods, further reinforcing the predominance of Black caricature. [24] Although some independent Black pictures, particularly those by Oscar Micheaux, opposed racial capitalism, however unevenly, "others delved deeper into the very construction of knowledge which collaborated with racism," including the Black middle class patrolling of race movies and the Black working class "for signs of rebelliousness." [25] "The most daring of the race film producers," Robinson concludes, "seemed to have been contented with displays of bourgeois respectability and modest uplift themes" rather than "a profound challenge or radical critique of racial capitalism." [26] Appealing to Black audiences by incorporating Black people into movies, white capitalists and middle-class Black filmmakers sold a limited representational equity as a substitute for a broader social equity.

Although the two historical contexts are distinct in many ways, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning* helps us see how an industry of racial capitalism like contemporary TV profits from anti-racist representations.[27] *Preacher, Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* are all, to varying degrees, aligned with progressive race politics, yet leave unchallenged—and in fact often actively

obscure—the racial capitalism in place that makes their progressive representations possible. Via state tax incentive programs, even progressive white and Black TV producers profit at the expense of poor Black people. This is consistent with the history Robinson recounts but also distinct: a form of neoliberal racial capitalism in place where TV programs siphon funds that could be spent on social welfare to instead pay for their critical narratives.

TV programs reproduce racial capitalism in both their content and mode of production, even when (perhaps especially when) they seem to be at odds, the first making it harder to see the second. As in Watchmen and Lovecraft Country, anti-racist stories can buttress racial capitalism by displacing it from view. Marxist and related traditions of ideological critique in film and media studies are revealing but limited to the extent that they focus exclusively on content and exempt from critical scrutiny the process of production in precarious places and its significance for media representation. By contrast, the conceptual framework of racial capitalism in place departs from the fetishization of representation in dominant anti-racisms on TV and in research. A focus on TV content can be alluring for viewers and scholars alike, dovetailing with a broader social emphasis on representational exclusion/inclusion as an index of racial equality. But this can come at the cost of substituting representational reparations for politicaleconomic ones, both when it comes to TV and to racial inequality in the larger world. The concept of racial capitalism in place disrupts such substitutions by connecting representation with local, situated conditions of production, concentrating critical attention on how both "social ideology" and "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society" take "essentially racial directions."

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Notes

Thanks for their suggestions to *Jump Cut* editor Julia Lesage, dossier editors Michael Litwack and Beth Capper, Shelley Streeby, and an anonymous reader.

- 1. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*: *The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 2. [return to page 1]
- 2. For an exception to the relative neglect of Robinson in media studies, see Anamik Saha, "Production Studies of Race and the Political Economy of Media," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 138–142.
- 3. Robinson, Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Robinson historicizes cinema as responding to several challenges faced by an older racial regime, including the end of reconstruction, cross-racial labor organizing, and capitalist exploitation of European immigrants incompletely schooled in U.S. racism. The challenges were also global, including the Mexican revolution, which threatened U.S. finance capital. "Spurred by the powerful interests implicated in the formulation of the new racial regime" that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, movie companies helped forge the "cultural discipline" and "social habituation" of a new Jim Crow racial regime (189-181).

The president of American Mutoscope, precursor to the famous Biograph Company where D.W. Griffith worked, was a prominent railroad executive; its vice president was a national bank examiner; and its board included a coal company executive (185-186). The railroads and allied industries had insatiable appetites for Indigenous land and for disposable, racialized labor, and filmmakers legitimated such theft and exploitation with racist representations. The large body of early anti-Black, anti-miscegenation movies was part of broader capitalist investments in segregation as labor control, while movies about Mexican criminality and gender/sex perversity formed the dominant U.S. visual culture of counterinsurgency. On American Mutoscope/Biograph's host of silent anti-Indian, anti-Black, anti-Mexican, and anti-Chinese pictures, see also Curtis Marez, *University Babylon: Film and Race Politics on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 30-67.

- 4. Floyd C. Covington, "The Negro Invades Hollywood," *Opportunity* 7.4 (April 1929), 111-113, 131, cited in Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, 297-98, 380.
- 5. Charlene B. Regester, "African American Extras in Hollywood During the 1920s and 1930s," *Film History* 9 (1997), 95-115.
- 6. Marez, *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

- 7. "For Filmmakers: Incentives," New Mexico Film Office, https://nmfilm.com/for-filmmakers/incentives/. By contrast, California's program offers 20% incentives for new shows and 25% if a production relocates to California from elsewhere.
- 8. New Mexico Film Office, "Estimated Tax Credits to be Paid Out Per Fiscal Year," https://nmfilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/September-2021-EST-TAX-CREDITS-TO-BE-PAID-OUT.pdf.
- 9. https://www.gpb.org/news/2021/05/11/kemp-signs-2022-georgia-budget-adds-back-most-school-funds-cut-in-pandemic. A little more than half of the cuts to public education have been restored in the 2022 budget, but the rest remain in effect.
- 10. Film LA Inc. 2019 Television Report (Hollywood: Film L.A. Inc., 2019), 12; Todd Spangler, "Netflix is Paying Less Than \$30 Million for Albuquerque Studios, Which Cost \$91 Million to Build," Variety, October 16, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/netflix-albuquerque-studios-deal-terms-30-million-1202981274/; "Atlanta Studio Sparks Protest for Plan to Clearcut 200-Acre Forrest for More Soundstages," The Wrap, July 7, 2021, https://www.thewrap.com/atlanta-blackhall-studio-protests-200-acre-forestsoundstages/. For related scholarship on incentives in Louisiana, see Vicki Mayer and Tanya Goldman, "Hollywood Handouts: Tax Credits in the Age of Economic Crisis," Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media 52 (Summer 2020), http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/mayerTax/text.html; and Vicki Mayer, Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans: The Lure of the Local Film Economy (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017). For a critical account of the history of incentive programs in different U.S. states and Canada, see Noelle Griffis, "The New Hollywood: 1980-1990," Hollywood on Location: An Industry History, eds. Joshua Gleich and Lawrence Webb (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).
- 11. Ryan Millsap, interviewed by Francesca Amiker, 11 Alive News, Atlanta, April 27, 2018, https://www.11alive.com/article/news/a-look-at-the-studio-and-1-job-behind-jumanji-venom-godzilla-and-more/85-546478414.
- 12. John Charles Bradbury, "Do Movie Production Incentives Generate Economic Development?", *Contemporary Economic Policy* 38.2 (August 2019), 327-342.
- 13. Marez, "From Mr. Chips to Scarface, or Racial Capitalism in *Breaking Bad*," *Critical Inquiry: In the Moment*, https://critinq.wordpress.com/2013/09/25/breaking-bad/.
- 14. The Los Angeles Times reports that, according to an anonymous source "close to the show," over its 62 episodes *Breaking Bad* employed 88 local workers. Even this modest number may be too high, since as economist Patrick Button argues, data generated by TV industry stakeholders are often unrealistic and inflated. It is in Hollywood's interest to cite impressive job numbers in order to justify state subsidies. By contrast, in his study of incentives in New Mexico, Button argues that their actual economic impact is minor. The increase in employment is not "statistically significant" and "very costly per job created." Media makers and state officials also claim that Breaking Bad stimulates other segments of the local economy, especially tourism. Button concedes this but emphasizes that because the direct economic impact of location shooting is so small, any "spill over effects on other industries" are also small. I would add that tourism in New Mexico means low wage, racialized jobs in hotels and restaurants for Mexican and Indigenous people, a situation that is consistent with the region's longer history as a site of Spanish and then Anglo settlement and colonial labor relations. Button concludes by suggesting that New Mexico state funds could have been better

- spent on "public goods such as education, health, or infrastructure." See Patrick Button, "Can Tax Incentives Create a Local Film Industry? Evidence from Louisiana and New Mexico," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 43.5 (2021): 658-684.
- 15. Leigh Claire La Berge, "Fiction is Liquid: States of Money in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad,*" *Journal of American Studies* 49.4 (October 2015): 1-20.
- 16. For a similar reading of *Breaking Bad*'s use of racial others as foils for centering whiteness, see Camile Fojas, *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers: Race and Crisis Capitalism in Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 17, 33-40.
- 17. I am indebted to Michael Litwack for prompting this formulation.
- 18. Clyde Woods, "Les Misérables of New Orleans: Trap Economics and the Asset Stripping Blues, Part 1," *American Quarterly* 61.3 (September 2009), 769-796. [return to page 2]
- 19. For a related analysis of the *Walking Dead* location of Grantville, Georgia, see Fojas, *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers,* 60.
- 20. Rebecca A. Wanzo, "Thinking about *Watchmen*: A Roundtable," *Film Quarterly* 73.4, https://filmquarterly.org/2020/06/26/thinking-about-watchmen-with-jonathan-w-gray-rebecca-a-wanzo-and-kristen-j-warner/.
- 21. Dell Upton, *What Can and Can't Be Said: Race, Uplift, and Monument Building in the Contemporary South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), Kindle Location 598.
- 22. Georgia Senate Bill 77, *TrackBill*, <a href="https://trackbill.com/bill/georgia-senate-bill-77-state-flag-seal-and-other-symbols-additional-protections-for-government-statues-provide/1680705/#/details=true. On his reelection campaign website, Kemp promotes his support for the tax incentive program ("Kemp Celebrates Georgia Film Industry, Re-Affirms Support of Tax Credit," *Brian Kemp*, *Governor*, https://briankemp2022.com/posts/press/kemp-celebrates-georgia-film-industry-re-affirms-support-tax-credit).
- 23. Robinson, Forgeries of Memory and Meaning, 227.
- 24. Ibid., 231.
- 25. Ibid., 271.
- 26. Ibid., 231.
- 27. I am grateful to Julia Lesage and Michael Litwack for suggesting this connection.

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Midtown Corners burning (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*).

Rompiendo puertas / Break and Enter (1971) Residential autonomy: economies of dispossession and their undoing

by Morgan Adamson

Less than 48 hours following George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, Minneapolis was ablaze. One of the early and consequential casualties of the uprising was Midtown Corners, an affordable housing development under construction in the parking lot of a strip mall containing an Aldi, a charter school, and a dive bar. On the eve of the burning of the Third Precinct, iconic images of the six-story apartment's wooden frame in flames circulated nationally and internationally as early evidence of the intensity of the uprising. Mainstream media outlets were quick to take an admonishing tone toward the protesters for burning apartments intended for low-income residents, lamenting the irrationality of such violence.

As local activists noted, however, such projects often give developers massive tax incentives to designate small percentages of housing units as "affordable" for a limited period of time Those strategies are themselves the products of decades of failed housing policy. [1] [open endnotes in new window] In the case of Midtown Corners, the builders designated all of the units "affordable," with the majority of units' rent set at a price corresponding to 60-80% Area Medium Income (AMI), reserving a small number of units for residents making less than 60% AMI. However, with the AMI in Minneapolis set at \$100,000 for a family of four, the inability of such developments to meet existing housing needs is obvious.

Rather than a mundane and apolitical thing, housing is a fundamental aspect of social reproduction, or "the daily and generational renewal of human life" that is essential to capitalism as a system. [2] Viewed through this lens, the burning of Midtown Corners was more than a senseless outburst. It signals the ways that the institutionalized, racial violence that led to George Floyd's murder cannot be separated from persistent contradictions in the domain of social reproduction that create housing insecurity.

With rising rents, rapid gentrification and displacement, and increased residential precarity over the past decade, the Minneapolis Uprising became, among other things, an opening through which to contend with housing. The epicenter of the uprising was a neighborhood still reeling from the anti-Black legacies of redlining and the 2008 foreclosure crisis, and persistent and pervasive racism against Indigenous residents. In the weeks following Floyd's killing, activists took over a vacant hotel and parks as sites of temporary shelter for unhoused people. These



Moms 4 Housing, Oakland, California (New York Review of Books).

efforts dovetailed with movements to #CancelRent incited by the pandemic and ongoing radical housing work by groups in the Twin Cities like Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia. The aftermath of the uprising intensified focus on the compounded histories of racial capitalism and settler colonialism that manifest themselves across the urban landscape through many BIPOC residents' lack of access to dignified housing.[3] The Minneapolis Uprising thus joined a wave of radicalized housing movements across the United States occurring in 2020, commencing with Moms 4 Housing, a group of unhoused mothers occupying vacant rental properties in Oakland, California. Building on movements around housing that arose from a decade earlier, such as #OccupyHomes, activists have expanded these strategies since the start of the pandemic in cities like Los Angeles and Philadelphia, while organizing numerous rent strikes and actions against evictions that have taken place across the country. Essential to these movements has been an explosion of alternative media. Video, social media, and other webbased resources have generated not only practices of solidarity but a collective vision that pushes the horizon of what housing could become in a liberated world.

These developments signal the urgency of attending to the residential as an essential site of critical investigation today. The house, according to Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva, operates on a number of registers simultaneously:

"A house is a juridical-economic-moral entity that, as *property*, has material (as asset), political (as dominium), and symbolic (as shelter) value." [4]

Though encompassing these intersecting facets of the economic and social life, housing has long been sidelined in Left politics. Yet housing opens onto a tangle of essential problems and concepts that Marxists critiques of media have elided. These fall, generally, into three interrelated categories that have elsewhere generated considerable conversation within cultural theory in recent years: 1) social reproduction, 2) dispossession within settler colonialism and racial capitalism, and 3) finance and real estate as central sites of value production in contemporary capitalism. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully dissect this constellation of issues, I will touch on each in proposing that residential politics is one node through which to rethink contemporary approaches to media critique and resistance. In particular, this approach recenters race and struggles outside wage relations that are essential to understanding contemporary capitalism.

Contemplating the ways that media participate in the production of residential politics, I turn to an independent activist documentary that is deeply relevant today—Newsreel's *Rompiendo puertas/Break and Enter* (1971), which documents struggles against the racialized dispossession of urban renewal in Manhattan. *Rompiendo puertas* is a useful starting point for constructing a genealogy of alternative media that builds toward a politics of *residential autonomy*. By that I mean the struggle to control the domain of social reproduction that begins with housing in a way that remaps claims to urban space beyond the regime of private property. This film is particularly useful because the vision of residential autonomy produced by *Rompiendo puertas* stands in stark contrast to the myriad ways commercial media participate in the racialized dispossession that built the real estate industry, especially in the U.S. settler colonial context.

Housing and economies of dispossession

Housing is a specific kind of commodity that opens up questions relevant to Marxism beyond traditional waged labor and ideology critiques.[5] Since the residence is the primary site of social reproduction, struggles around housing decenter the male, industrial worker as the protagonist of class struggle. As

feminists in the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s argued, the home and the labor conducted within it are not only directly productive of capital, but the kitchen is as crucial as the factory as a space from which to organize, an insight that the Left ignores at its own peril. [6] The claim that the "residential is political" also highlights the significance of myriad struggles around housing in the U.S. over the course of the twentieth century, many led by BIPOC women who have fought to reshape urban life in more equable ways. [7] Questions over housing are ultimately about the production of everyday life, as David Madden and Peter Marcuse put it:

"housing is the precondition both for work and for leisure. Controlling one's housing is a way to control one's labor as well as one's free time, this is why struggles over housing are always, in part, struggles over autonomy." [8]

Residential alienation—defined as unsafe and precarious living conditions and forced displacement—produces the opposite of lived autonomy, disrupting every facet of social life as well as the subject's mental and physical health. [9] The pandemic has brought the politics of home to the fore, as a lack of childcare, domestic violence, and evictions have too often stretched an already precarious domain of social reproduction to a breaking point. The struggle for what I am calling residential autonomy, then, is not simply the struggle for decent housing but also the struggle to control the conditions of social reproduction that are manifest in a very situated and material way—in the place one lives.

In addition to its immediately political nature as the primary site of social reproduction, housing's legal, commodified status as landed property makes it a principal vector through which unremitting processes of racial and colonial dispossession operate. Redlining and segregation, as well as practices of systematic disinvestment in neighborhoods occupied by nonwhite residents, set the stage for the widespread financial dispossession of BIPOC communities in more recent decades. The "predatory inclusion" of BIPOC populations into homeownership and subsequent wave of foreclosures after the 2008 crisis was predicated on more than a century of racist housing policies. [10] Moreover, recent scholarship has explored the co-constitution of regimes of property and race, such as Brenna Bhandar who argues:

"legal forms of property ownership and the modern racial subject are articulated and realized in conjunction with one another." [11]

Thinking through the role of property within racial capitalism, Erin McElroy contends that "property functions as an anti-Black technology of dispossession" through the casting of Black spaces as "empty and threatening." [12] In a parallel vein, recent work on settler colonialism has brought attention to the ongoing practices that stem from and reproduce structures of settler colonial dispossession across racialized groups. For example, Sarah Launius and Geoffrey Alan Boyce argue that within urban contexts, tropes of settler colonialism and frontier logics are still "processes that continue to produce inequality via the devaluation and dispossession of heterogeneous communities of color from their land, property, and way of life." [13] That is, the land speculation that was a primary feature of settler colonial dispossession is contiguous with what Byrd, et. al. have called contemporary "economies of dispossession"—

"those multiple and intertwined genealogies of racialized property, subjection, and expropriation through which capitalism and colonialism take shape historically and change over time...

Colonization and the economies of racial subjection serve as conditions of possibility in the United States for the ways in which financial institutions and market speculators have produced and

profited from the most economically disenfranchised." [14]

Focusing on dispossession, or the separation of subjects from the means of social reproduction, as a key concept of both racial capitalism and settler colonialism, recent scholars have revisited and refined theories of primitive accumulation as an ongoing part of capitalism. [15] Following from these insights, we must foreground how contemporary economies of dispossession that operate through financial and real estate speculation feed off the systematic, racialized devaluation of "land, property, and way of life" of those dispossessed.

The urgency to understand these mechanisms of dispossession through housing comes into focus when we consider the importance of residential real estate to contemporary global capitalism. Professionally-managed real estate investment markets massively increased as a global asset class over the past decade to reach \$9.6 trillion in 2019, a 7.8% increase from 2018. Figures like this indicate that cycles of disinvestment and dispossession through real estate have only accelerated since the 2008 financial crisis. [16] Minneapolis, which has the highest racial disparity in homeownership rates in the country, has seen an explosion of private equity firms and real estate investment trusts buying up single-family homes since the foreclosure crisis, intensifying evictions, fees, and other forms of financial dispossession across the city. [17] We can think of global real estate markets as what Marx referred to "real abstractions"; though abstract and speculative, they articulate with existing modes of racialized domination to create forms of dispossession that are both novel and established. [18]

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HGTV's Flip or Flop Nashville, promotional image.



HGTV's Flip or Flop Fort Worth, promotional image.



Placard tells purchase price, cost of renovation, sale price, and profit. This speculative "profit calculator," with projected profit to flip property, is part of HGTV's *Windy City Rehab*.

Media's residential politics

It is my contention that questions of residential politics—and attendant concepts of reproduction, landed property, real estate and finance, and colonial and racial dispossession—are important political lenses through which to approach film and media criticism today. When developing this perspective, I want to emphasize that film and media do not simply represent these phenomena but rather are, in the words of Steven Shaviro, "expressive" of them in that film and media are "both symptomatic and productive" of social reality.[19] One need only to look to the ways that Hollywood in its first decades celebrated settler colonial dispossession, reinforcing ideas of whiteness as a propertied subject position, or to consider the ways that television as a medium has shaped domestic life since its inception. [20] In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, renewed scholarly attention to the mediated politics of "home" has refocused on the political and economic ramifications of our attachments to residential spaces. Annie McLananhan's Dead Pledges, for example, analyzes the photography of foreclosed homes to consider the uncanny power of private property and horror films as she thinks through the ways that financial speculation produced the domestic as a site or terror.[21]

One of the most obvious intersections of the media and residential politics has been the recent proliferation of home-related reality television—especially the HGTV network. Such television reinforced the transformation of home into a site of financial investment for the entrepreneurial subject, as well as the acceptability of surveillance within the domestic realm.[22] In the lead up to the 2008 crisis, Shawn Shimpach observed:

"HGTV's daily schedule effectively blur[ed] the distinctions between self-expression and the financialization of everyday life... The ideology of domesticity is again extended, from dwelling to home and, now, to investment." [23]

More than a decade later, HGTV's current programming has solidified this tendency and now largely serves as a how-to guide for financial speculation in housing. Shows like "Flip or Flop," "Flipping 101," and "Good Bones," position everyday viewers as real estate speculators, while projecting a colorblind image of aspirational property ownership. Promoting viewer identification with what George W. Bush dubbed the "ownership society," popular media not only reflects but also foments market-based approaches to the residential that further the displacement of BIPOC communities. Moreover, these shows function as alibis for investment capital by normalizing the violence of displacement. For example, in shows like "Windy City Rehab," "before" sequences often feature the host walking through an occupied apartment full of the belongings of low-income residents whose eviction is imminent. Transforming a home into a shell for speculative capital, such sequences produce an impression that neighborhoods occupied primarily by BIPOC residents are devoid of inherent value, empty spaces waiting to be filled. In this way, HGTV and similar programing directly participates in economies of dispossession.









"Before" images of the belongings of residents who are presumably being evicted while the show's hosts tour properties for sale. Stills, HGTV's *Windy City Rehab*.

While popular media such as film and television are expressive of the politics of the residential, new digital technologies are increasingly responsible for the direct management and control of the residential and thus reproductive domain. As Desiree Fields has demonstrated, the opening of the market of single-family home rental properties in the wake of the 2008 foreclosure crisis was largely facilitated by new digital technologies such as "mobile computing, new sources of data analytics, and digital platforms." [24] In addition, Fields argues that these new technologies have been in turn deployed through what she calls an "automated landlord"—

"whereby the management of tenants is increasingly not only mediated, but governed, by smartphones, digital platforms, and apps, and the data and analytics these devices and infrastructures gather and enable." [25]

Crucial to the logistics of large multinational firms in managing geographically dispersed rental properties and extracting revenue from them, these digital media constitute, for Fields, an important site of struggle. Similarly, Erin McElroy's work on "proptech," as it is known within the real estate industry, explores the increasing use of surveillance technologies such as facial recognition to screen and control tenants As a result, proptech "transit into domestic space carceral and surveillance technologies known to disproportionally target Black residents in gentrifying neighborhoods." [26]



Arguing that private property is itself a technology of racial capitalism, McElroy demonstrates how new digital technologies expand and intensify the capacity of real estate markets to operate as a vector of racial dispossession. Tracing these processes to earlier phases of urban dispossession, McElroy argues that the urban renewal projects of the 1950s-1980s laid the groundwork for contemporary proptech and "platform urbanism" through the use of mediated technologies such as "database systems, GIS modeling, cybernetics, and urban control rooms." [27] If private property is, at its most essential, a "relation of exclusion," then this relation is increasingly mediated through technologies that streamline and reinforce the exclusion of large segments of the population from residential autonomy. [28]



Computer-generated images of property after renovation. Stills, HGTV's Windy City Rehab.



Residential autonomy in Rompiendo puertas

The history of racialized dispossession through landed real estate has elements of both continuity and disjuncture, as new forms of expropriation and technologies of dispossession continually work on and through the domain of social reproduction. In exploring the ways that media not only reflect but also participate in the production and governance of domestic space. I turn to an earlier moment of accumulation. The urban renewal projects of the mid-Twentieth Century, while operating through a different configuration of state and capital alliance, nevertheless offer important insights into the present. Focusing on a film that engages struggles against urban renewal, I explore how alternative media can open up to a potential politics beyond economies of dispossession. Newsreel's Rompiendo puertas/Break and Enter (A.K.A Squatters) (1971) produces an image of residential autonomy and the collective production of the domestic beyond the confines of private property. Rompiendo puertas both documents and participates in the activities of Operation Move-In, an organized effort to resist urban renewal in the Upper Westside of Manhattan in the early 1970s through the takeover of vacant buildings, owned by the city, which had been slated for demolition. Growing out of a decade of radical New York tenant activism centered in Harlem, Operation Move-In was one of the most extensive and well-organized squatters' movements in U.S. history, led primarily by Puerto Rican activists. At the time of its filming, 190 families were occupying 38 buildings across the city. As has been well-documented, the U.S. urban renewal push starting in the 1950s had destroyed more housing than it produced and had displaced countless communities of color in the process of "slum clearance" in which the state and capital reclaimed valuable land close to central business districts for redevelopment.[29] Though New York city had designated a portion of the new housing for low-income tenants and displaced residents, local activists dubbed the plan "urban removal," and viewed it as a thinly veiled effort to move poor people of color to the outer Burroughs. [30]

Rompiendo puertas centers the resistance of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Black women and presents a thorough analysis of the lived realities of economies of dispossession within racial capitalism. It also offers a profound, internationalist articulation of a politics of residential autonomy, the possibility collectively reimagining domestic life beyond landed regimes of private property and the racialized dispossession that they produce. Like Newsreel's earlier film Columbia Revolt (1968), the filmmakers actively participate in the illegal occupation of buildings, producing a highly situated account of life behind the barricades. Unlike Columbia Revolt, however, Rompiendo puertas decenters the figure of the white student and Black militant celebrated by the New Left in favor of the voices of working women of color. In doing so, as Cynthia Young argues, the film represents a transitional moment in the political film culture of the time. Moving away from the celebration of vanguardism that characterized some early Newsreel films, Rompiendo puertas pivots toward a Third Worldism that would come to define Third World Newsreel collective in subsequent years. [30] I would add that it also represents a pivot towards a feminist film culture in its focus on the reproductive domain, one which uniquely captures resistance to racialized economies of dispossession at this pivotal moment.

Rompiendo puertas opens with a sequence of bulldozers dismantling a row of brownstone apartment buildings. A young woman explains that the whole block is being destroyed

"just because they want to put new hotels. It's all right if they give us a temporary place to stay in, until they break the block and fix it up







Interview with young person against the backdrop of buildings being demolished with new, luxury apartments in the background. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.



again, and give us back our own apartment [...] and make them bigger, which bigger families can live in. But they just want to break it down and put more rent, and more restaurants, so they can fit more people, but only their people: white... They think because they got money, they've got rights to throw us out—they ain't!"

As she finishes her account of the situation, the camera pans to two new, high rise apartments beyond the brownstones and tilts upward, revealing their ominous and towing presence. The woman's statement provides a précis of the film's underlying theses: the displacement of poor families of color from long-neglected apartments has both a racial and financial dimension. The opening sequence and the analysis of the policies of urban renewal told by the film's protagonists, largely Puerto Rican and Dominican women, underscore how economies of dispossession function through the systematic divestment of spaces occupied by poor people of color in a way that makes them prime targets for speculation. It also emphasizes the ways that urban renewal often operated through the differential valuation of racialized spaces with working-class people of color as a strategy of accumulation. Through this process, the state directly oversaw the "root shock" produced by largescale displacemen. [31]

Rompiendo puertas builds its argument that residents have the right to stay by valorizing their waged and unwaged labor over the claims of capital and private property. In the distinctive newsreel "voice-off" style, another woman advances a labor theory of value, which constitutes a right to the city for working people:

"We are the people who built this city. We work *here*. We work in factories, in hospitals, supermarkets, subways, banks. So, we are the city...Our work, and our children's work, are building this country."

This voice-off is followed by a montage of Black and Latinx women and men working in these jobs—serving coffee at a diner, delivering goods, counting money as a cashier at a grocery store, and raising children. These labors occur primarily within the service economy, but also include domestic labor tied to the reproduction of the labor force itself. These labors, the film argues, the constitute the claim to housing that legitimates the seizure of territory by Operation Move-In. The film goes on to emphasize this point, arguing that "raising children is a fulltime job," but poor women of color are forced to work outside the home and face untold discrimination doing so. Such an argument distinguishes its feminist critique of reproductive labor from the emergent white feminism in the United States. [32] Complicating its delineation of waged and unwaged, productive and unproductive labors, this early presentation of labor sets the stage for the film's later exploration of politically reconstituting the reproductive sphere through squatting.

The title of *Rompiendo puertas/Break and Enter* upends the law's role in protecting private property, reappropriating legal terminology for criminal trespass. In a dialectical move, the film celebrates its trespass while reassigning criminality to the city and landlords. Operation Move-In's first building takeover occurs after a funeral procession for a young boy, Jimmy Santos, who was





Various labors of Move-In members, both waged and unwaged. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.





asphyxiated in his apartment due to a faulty boiler that a slumlord had neglected to fix. Rather than simply blaming the landlord, the voices-off claim that culpability lies with the city and its inability to provide safe and dignified housing. The city's negligence becomes the justification for moving the family into a vacant building currently owned by the city and slated for demolition. Along the march from Jimmy's house to the new squat, the camera again tilts to modern high rises that loom above the mourners, drawing out the contradiction between the hazardous living conditions that they experience and the imposing luxury of these new settlements. As members of the funeral procession rip open the city's metal barriers on the windows and doors of the building to be occupied, the crowd sings along to a protest song about Puerto Rican pride. Undertaking a putatively criminal act in the light of day, Operation Move-In actively undermines the city and private capital's legal claims to ownership while celebrating self-determination.

What would it mean to build a vision of urban life beyond the regime of private property? *Rompiendo puertas* starts this task by articulating the terms of "residential autonomy," which are summarized by a voice-off early in the film as participants move furniture and suitcases into an abandoned building:

"This thing about liberating apartments should go all over the world. To show the private landlords, show the system, that *people should live where they want and how they want*. I wish I could liberate a whole neighborhood. A whole twenty block area, like the West Side we live in. Just push those white shirts out of that office. So, we work at our own thing. We would have community control for everything."

This sequence puts forward a prefigurative plan for a liberated urbanism that moves beyond the demand for adequate, affordable housing towards the liberation of buildings, blocks, and neighborhoods from the control of the capitalist class. Unlike Keynesian efforts to plan urban life by creating spaces for people to live in a hierarchical fashion, residential autonomy allows for people to determine their own conditions for life—to live where and how they want. A common refrain in housing struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, the principle of community control in the remainder of the film explores precisely what this might mean, indicating the kinds of social infrastructures that must be built to bring a new residential reality into being.

Rompiendo puertas makes clear that the production of residential autonomy, first and foremost, demands militant community defense of newly liberated spaces. At a meeting inside the occupied building, the camera cuts between women expressing their determination to hold the buildings and centers on a closeup of a middle-aged woman:

"We're going to stay barricaded right in here. We're not coming out. I know I won't be coming out."







Protest of Jimmy Santos's death and taking of Operation Move-In's first building. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.

Operation Move-In residents speaking at a meeting in occupied building. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.

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Protests as police attempt to remove residents from occupied building. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.

Connecting their lack of adequate housing with the larger colonial and imperial context, in particular about Puerto Rico and the war in Vietnam, the women in this scene obliquely reference a theory, in wide circulation in the U.S. Third World Left at the time, that areas of a city like Harlem were themselves internal colonies of the United States, or what James Baldwin called "occupied territory." [33] The veracity of this thesis is borne out when the film shows the police response to the occupation, attempting to remove families in the middle of the night. A child holds a sign outside the apartment as the police enter: "WE GO HOMELESS WHILE SPECULATORS HOLD APARTMENTS EMPTY." There is no question on whose behalf the state is working. A later scene shows police entering occupied buildings, smashing bathrooms and kitchens in order to render apartments uninhabitable. A rhythmic hammering sound accompanies a montage of stills of the damaged apartments as a woman's voice-off says "you would think we were in Alabama," referencing the fact that in addition to destroying apartment fixtures, police placed dogs inside apartments to deter squatters. Beyond a failed governmental policy, this sequence reveals the violence of urban renewal inflicted upon poor people of color with the police as the occupying force who systematically bar residents from possessing the very means of social reproduction.

We get a glimpse of how to build a new sense of home in the face of such violence as Operation Move-In members fix up apartments the city abandoned and the police destroyed—ripping off barriers, repairing bathrooms, and painting. Voices-off contemplate the meaning of housing as a necessity that should be free to all, and discuss the implications of their collective labor restoring apartments on behalf of the residents rather than a landlord. The film offers the inverse of today's HGTV model of entrepreneurial subjectivity cultivated through the





Residents fixing up occupied buildings. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.







Operation Move-In activists occupying new luxury apartments. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.

acquisition and improvement of landed real estate. In contrast, the scenes of home improvement in *Rompiendo puertas* build towards a new set of residential values that foreground mutual aid within an autonomous reproductive sphere. A women's voice explains:

"We are working for ourselves here. We're working for poor people. We took this apartment, we liberated the whole building, and we help each other."

The film goes on to explore the collectivization of reproductive infrastructures in the occupied buildings, like the creation of a day care center, collective kitchens, a food co-op, a library, and network of trained medical aids for each building. In their trespass of private property, Operation Move-In produces a prefigurative politics that glimpses a life beyond it. *Rompiendo puertas* similarly uses the situated and partial knowledge generated in the collective life behind the barricades to create a powerful image of residential autonomy that reimagines domestic life. In doing so, the film opens a space for creativity in which a transvaluation of values, particularly those of private property and real estate, allows for reimagining how urban space might be partitioned and the uses to which it should be put, namely, an autonomous, communal support of quotidian life.

Considering the ways that the term "luxury" has become synonymous with a form of real estate implicated in the repeated displacement and dispossession of communities of color, *Rompiendo puertas* ends by reimagining what the reclaiming of residential luxury might look like. An Operation Move-In activist, a middle-aged Puerto Rican woman, explains:

"the next step will not be breaking into old buildings. We'll be breaking into the luxury building, to see how we like it... it will be in a fancy house, so they know we really mean business."

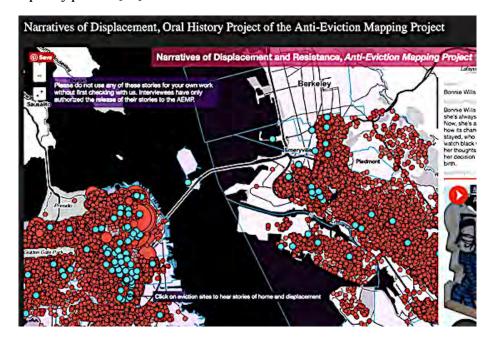
The film cuts to b-roll of an imposing, low angle shot of a luxury apartment similar to earlier shots in the film. Except this time, it is followed by detail shots of Puerto Rican and Black families leaning out the windows, waving at onlookers below. Rather than the physical manifestations of capital, the final sequence suggests a future in which such buildings are reclaimed as the means of social reproduction and reparations for colonial and racial violence. The film concludes with a high-angle shot of a building held by Operation Move-In, before panning to a high-rise luxury apartment, and then to all of Manhattan. In doing so, it achieves a transformation of perspective, from the diminished and isolated vantage point of individual tenants to a position of collective power capable of surveying the entire city as a site of possibility. *Rompiendo puertas* thus remaps urban space. It renders legible the violence underlying the abstractions of capital and the state while at the same time producing a counter-image of residential autonomy that allows for a new spatial orientation. It accomplishes a relation of urban reconnection and dis-alienation by valorizing territorial reclamation. At the same time, the film remaps an international terrain of struggle, expressing solidarity with housing movements around the world—particularly in Puerto Rico, Italy, and Saigon. Manhattan thus becomes one node in an international network



View of Manhattan as site for potential residential autonomy. Stills *Rompiendo puertas*.

of struggle for residential autonomy.

As the trade and management of real estate grows ever more important to global capitalism and economies of dispossession continue to intensify the production of residential alienation, the project of cognitively mapping these processes and providing new political perspectives is essential. First, we must expand on the kinds of scholarship mentioned above, critically analyzing the ways that a variety of media—film, television, and digital media—participate in the expression, production, and management of residential politics. Doing so entails unpacking the ways media participate in the tangle of problems mentioned at the beginning of this essay: social reproduction, racialized economies of dispossession, and the operation of finance and real estate industries as sites of value creation. A second task is the construction of alternate genealogies of media that point to trajectories of resistance within the domain of the residential. Rompiendo puertas, I have suggested, is an example of one such archival text that might offer new ways of thinking through our present situation by offering a vision of residential autonomy predicated on the liberation of urban space. Today, media projects like the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project—which uses data visualization, GIS, and oral histories to document and challenge displacement in the Bay Area, New York, and Los Angeles—provide templates for producing the kinds of counter-knowledge around housing that refocus on the residential as an essential site for contemporary politics.[34]



Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. Screen Capture.

Over the course of the pandemic, with the escalation of housing struggles such as the coordination of a national rent strike in May 2020, a flurry of websites, Facebook groups, and online videos have sought to educate, coordinate, and mobilize tenants in the face of looming evictions. At the same time, major victories have been won in places like Oakland and Philadelphia, where vacant houses that were occupied by unhoused mothers have been placed in a community land trust. The escalation of tactics in the face of the catastrophic failure of state and federal governments during the pandemic has brought new attention to the politics of the residential, and the creative remapping of space and the reimagination of home beyond private property is well underway. As I write, the Center for Disease Control's eviction moratorium has expired in in most states, prompting fears of a wave of mass evictions in the coming months; at the

same time, federal and state governments solutions have centered on aid to tenants and landlords to pay back rent in lieu of tackling any underlying causes of the crisis. Meanwhile, new networks of solidarity are growing outside of the state and non-profit sectors, such as the Autonomous Tenants Union Network/La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos (ATUN), which articulates a radical vision centered on social reproduction, drawing lines of solidarity between international, anti-carceral, and indigenous Land Back movements, among others.[35] Refusing failed Keynesian or neo-liberal solutions to housing, social movements are pushing toward new horizons of residential autonomy while building alternative media infrastructures in the process.

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Notes

- 1. For a critique of what is known as "inclusionary zoning" as a policy for creating affordable housing see: Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (London: Verso, 2019), 111-119. [return to page 1]
- 2. Susan Ferguson, "Social Reproduction: What's the big idea?," Pluto Press Blog, https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson/ (accessed September 20, 2021).
- 3. For a recounting of the remarkable story about how Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia (United Renters for Justice) organize tenants to gain control of five buildings owned by notorious Minneapolis slumlord Steve Frenz, see: Matthew Desmond, "The Tenants Who Evicted Their Landlord," *New York Times*. October 13, 2020.
- 4. Chakravartty, Paula and Denise Ferreira da Silva. "Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (September 2012): 362.
- 5. Madden, David and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing* (London: Verso, 2016), 25-6.
- 6. Federici, Sylvia and Nicole Cox, "Counterplanning from the Kitchen," in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Common Notions, 2012), 28.
- 7. David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing*, 1. See Also: Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 8. David Madden and Peter Marcuse, In Defense of Housing, 12.
- 9. Ibid.
- 10. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 5.
- 11. Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Land, Law, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.
- 12. Erin McElroy, "Property as Technology: Temporal Entanglements of Race, Space, and Displacement," *City* 24, no. 1-2 (2020): 114. In this article, McElroy draws on Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright to develop the argument regarding the anti-Black logics of property and the casting of Black spaces as "empty and threatening": Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright, "The Anti-blackness of Global Capital," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no. 1(2019): 11.

- 13. Sarah Launius and Geoffrey Alan Boyce, "More than Metaphor: Settler Colonialism, Frontier Logic, and the Continuities of Racialized Dispossession in a Southwest U.S. City," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 0, no. 0 (2020): 6.
- 14. Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy, "Predatory Value, Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities," *Social Text* 135, Vol. 36, No. 2 (June 2018), 2.
- 15. For example, Robert Nichols defines dispossession under settler colonialism as a recursive process in which "theft is the means by which private property is generated" (9). For Nichols, settler colonial dispossession of land was foundational to the creation of legal frameworks of private property in which indigenous peoples were only understood to have rights as property owners only in retrospect, after the occasion of their dispossession. Robert Nichols, *Theft is property!: Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).
- 16. Desiree Fields, "Constructing a New Asset Class: Property-led Financial Accumulation after the Crisis," *Economic Geography* 0, no.0 (2017): 1-23.
- 17. Susan Du and Jeff Hargarten, "North Minneapolis Renters Wage a Fight with Private Equity Landlords," Minneapolis Star Tribune, May 29, 2021, https://www.startribune.com/racial-homeownership-gap-in-the-twin-cities-highest-in-the-nation/600072649/ (accessed July 5, 2021).
- 18. For an excellent discussion of Marx's concept of "concrete abstraction" in this context, see: Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, "Race, Real Estate, and Real Abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 194 (November/December 2015): 8-17.
- 19. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2010), 2.
- 20. See, for example: Peter Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas: Film and Colonial Encounters in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010). Examples of earlier work on television that deal with the politics of the residential include: John Hartley, *Uses of Television* (London: Routledge, 1999); Cecilia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 21. Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017). See also: Julia Leyda, "Deamon Debt: PARANORMAL ACTIVITY as Recessionary Post-Cinematic Allegory," in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film, ed. Shane Denson* and Julia Leyda (Reframe: Sussex, 2016): https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/4-1-julia-leyda/ (accessed June 15, 2021).
- 22. Shawn Shimpach, "Realty Reality: HGTV and the Subprime Crisis," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3, (September 2012): 517.
- 23. Shawn Shimpach, "Realty Reality," 524.
- 24. Desiree Fields, "Automated Landlord: Digital Technologies and Post-crisis Financial Accumulation," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 0, no. 0 (2019): 16.
- 25. Desiree Fields, "Automated Landlord," 1.
- 26. Erin McElroy, "Property as Technology," 122.

- 27. Erin McElroy, "Property as Technology," 121.
- 28. Robert Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 31.
- 29. David Madden and Peter Marcuse, In Defense of Housing, 131-3.
- 30. Cynthia A. Young, Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of the U.S. Third World Left (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 143.
- 31. For more on the concept of "root shock" and its association with urban renewal, see: Erin McElroy, "Property as Technology," 119-121; and Mindy Fullilove, "Root Shock: The Consequences of African American Dispossession," *Journal of Urban Health* 78, no. 1 (2001): 71–80.
- 32. For early corrections to White feminist critiques of domestic labor from Black Feminists, see similar argument in Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in Albert and Albert, *The Sixties Papers*, 500–508, and Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).
- 33. James Baldwin, "Report from Occupied Territory," *Nation*, July 11, 1966. See also: Morgan Adamson, "Internal Colony as Political Perspective: Counterinsurgency, Extraction, and Anticolonial Legacies of '68 in the United States," *Cultural Politics* 15, no. 3 (2019): 343-357.
- 34. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project: https://antievictionmap.com/
- 35. Autonomous Tenants Union Network/La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos, "On the Autonomous Tenants Union Network La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos (ATUN)," *Radical Housing Journal* 3, no. 1 (May 2021): 99-104).

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SISTER JOHNNIE TILLMAN, National Director of the National Welfare Rights Organization.

Johnnie Tillmon gives a speech at the Black Panther Party's Black Community Survival Conference in Oakland on the weekend of March 29, 1972.

"I am a statistic": engineering counterinsurgency against the Welfare Rights Movement

by Yvonne Bramble

"We got a dictionary and found that anonymous meant nameless. We understood that what people thought about welfare recipients ... was that they had no rights, they didn't exist; they was a statistic and not a human being. So we thought that would fit us very well."—Johnnie Tillmon[1]

[open endnotes in new window]

In 1963, after eight months on welfare, Johnnie Tillmon and five of her friends began organizing welfare recipients in their public housing project in the Watts neighborhood of South-Central Los Angeles. The goal was "to be independent and if you weren't independent, to be treated with dignity." [2] Where caseworkers manipulated and abused welfare mothers, raiding their homes in the night and inspecting every aspect of their lives for vice, this organization—Aid to Needy Children (ANC) Mothers Anonymous—and others like it across the country would stand up for them and their families. [3] Throughout the 1960s, welfare recipients developed the self-organization necessary to place pressure on the critical chokepoints of benefit distribution and eligibility determination, from local welfare offices to Sacramento and Washington, D.C.



PROTEST MARCH — Twentyfour demonstrators, protesting what they called inadequate welfare payments, marched on

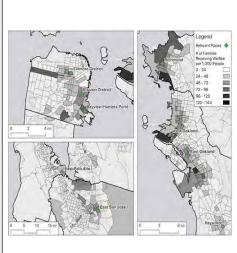
the San Bernardino County Courthouse yesterday. The Board of Supervisors met briefly with part of the group. The

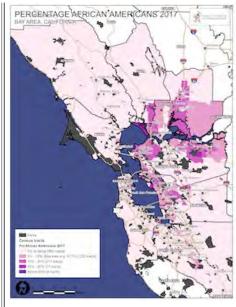
marchers agreed to file a written report with the board at a later date concerning "injustices" they said exist.

Across the country, poor Black women developed a grassroots anti-poverty movement, channeled into the fight for access to the historically discriminatory welfare system. This protest took place in San Bernardino on June 30, 1966, in coordination with dozens of similar protests across the country.

By 1966 this network of local groups became a nationwide Welfare Rights Movement, with over 30,000 members in the umbrella National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) by 1968.[4] By this time, Tillmon served as national chairman and a leader of this movement of poor, mostly Black women.

As the national movement reached its peak, welfare caseloads in Alameda, San Francisco, and Santa Clara Counties increased by 168, 165, and 239 percent respectively over the course of the decade).[5] [Click to see California Caseload Chart] Local welfare rights organizations in Oakland, San Francisco, and Richmond played a critical role in ensuring that all women could receive the benefits that might allow them to weather the worsening job market amid the skyrocketing costs of housing, transportation, and other essentials. These women developed their class consciousness not "on the shop floor" but within their everyday lives, "in government welfare offices, the supermarket, and within their homes," thereby centering the realm of social reproduction within the terrain of class struggle.[6] In so doing, these poor women refused the state-mediated market demands on their productive and reproductive labor while drawing on a larger critique of racial capitalism advanced by the radical and Third World left. [7]





Map of select regions of the San Francisco Bay Area showing the number of families in each tract receiving welfare per 1,000 people in the total population of that tract. Based on IPUMS geographical census data. Created by author in QGIS. [Click on map to see full size.] Map of the concentration of Black people in the bay area by census tract as of 2017. The historical population centers of Black people are also the historical centers of welfare receipt and welfare rights activity. [Click on map to see full size.]

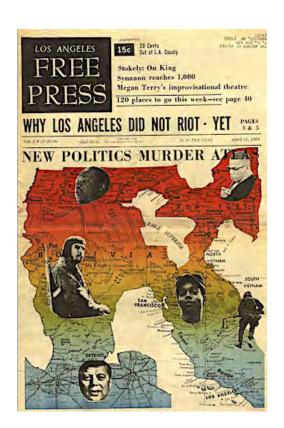


Illustration on the front page of the LA Free Times after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Given the high concentration of poor Black women in the welfare rights movement, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (1963), Malcolm X (1965), Che Guevara (1967), and Bobby Hutton (1968, the week before King) and the American Invasion of

In this article, I examine the ongoing partnership between technology companies and the state in beating back this self-organization among the country's poorest workers during the second half of the twentieth century. My focus here is specifically on the political history of the Earnings Clearance System, a computerized batch processing and information management system that emerged out of California's Welfare Reform Act of 1971. I show how technocratic appeals to the transparency, efficiency, and immateriality of computation were leveraged to isolate, impoverish, and further exploit families on welfare. As the Welfare Rights Movement inched the state closer to financial crisis by ballooning the welfare rolls, state bureaucrats and technology companies leveraged the seemingly neutral terrain of technology. Through the development and maintenance of computer-based fraud auditing systems such as the Earning Clearance System, state functionaries sought to secure global capitalist development from the encroaching "entitlement" of the poor.

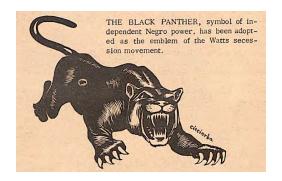
The late 60s and 70s mark a crucial period in this history of counterinsurgency as the technology industry entered the on-the-ground implementation of welfare policy for the first time under the direction of Governor Ronald Reagan and Democrats in the California state legislature. I argue that politicians and administrators saw in cheaper, faster, and more adaptable integrated circuit-era computers the key to "resolving" many of their social and economic crises. [8] Meanwhile, technology companies, eager for any edge in an increasingly competitive and expanding world market for computers and computational services, happily obliged them. These companies encouraged dreams of total control over the poor despite the very real technical limitations pervasive in this era of computing. [9]

The state and county governments of California, in partnership with computer corporations, thus waged a war on the Welfare Rights Movement through such administrative and technological reforms. The politicians cloaked their reactionary aspirations to eviscerate welfare benefits and punish the poor by appealing to computing technology's putative "neutrality," "efficiency," and

Vietnam no doubt weighed on many welfare rights activist's minds just as heavily as King's. [Click on image to see large.]



This comic in the February 2, 1972, issue of the Santa Cruz Sentinel identifies the often-studied relationship between women's secretarial labor, the exploited free labor of women and girls under capitalism, and the "efficiency" of the computer. Sexist as it is, it does raise the relevant question, are there qualities more important than computational efficiency in running a business or government agency?



"transparency." These regulatory technologies and techniques that were pioneered in California were later adopted by other state governments, and eventually cemented into the national welfare structure through Reagan's Presidency. And yet, as I show, in response to these reactionary assaults, activists affiliated with the Welfare Rights Movement developed an incisive critique of the state and capital's ideological production of computational transparency. They also enacted that critique through legal challenges to the Earnings Clearance System, and their lawsuits drew attention to the profound non-transparency of welfare administration technologies.

In charting this history, I join digital media studies scholars such as Lisa Nakamura, Tara McPherson, and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun in pushing media studies to center race and gender in analyses of computing technology and its industrial history under capitalism.[10] Today, the technology industry acts as part of a new vanguard of global capitalist development that relies on socially vulnerable and largely female workers of color, whether within the U.S. or the neocolonial periphery.[11] Workers at the bottom compete for a chance to avoid obliteration while firms at the top compete to exploit both the winners and the losers in formal and informal work arrangements.[12] But beyond the more obviously exploitative shopfloor of electronics assembly or the labs of the "bold" and the "brilliant," an analysis of the entangled histories of welfare struggles and computing indicates the need for a digital media studies that directly explores the question of *social reproduction*—an issue so often raised by Marxist feminists over the past century of organizing and scholarship.[13]

A social reproduction analysis of computation must attend not only to more recent struggles against subsuming reproductive labor through the mechanism of digital media—broadly construed under the lens of "free labor." We must also reckon with how computing technologies have long been enlisted to manage, police, and assault the social reproduction of working-class women of color and their communities.[14] In other words, while digital media scholars have usefully drawn attention to the ways in which digital technologies under late capitalism exploit "affective" or "consumptive" labor (both of which are forms of reproductive labor), my analysis reveals the deeper roots of social reproduction struggles against computation. Ultimately, the confrontation between the Welfare Rights Movement and welfare administration technologies teaches us that the political question confronting digital media studies today is not simply the surveillance of poor women or the invasion of their privacy.[15] Rather, it concerns the raced, classed, and gendered subordination of poor women as an ever-expanding segment of the increasingly immiserated global working class.[16]

Engineering the crackdown

Democratic Governor Pat Brown and his bid to defeat the Republican upstart and former Hollywood House Un-American Activities Committee snitch Ronald Reagan signals the vanguard of capitalist reaction against the Welfare Rights Movement in California. While Brown remained popular during his first term—enough so to win re-election over former Vice President Richard Nixon in 1962—he turned decisively in his second term against the Left and the Black, poor, and immigrant communities that had driven California's population boom since World War II.[17] Rebellions in Watts and other cities across the United States that challenged systemic racism and poverty, overt police brutality, and state disinvestment among working-class communities of color were critical in the leadup of the November 1966 gubernatorial election.[18]

Aided by the white press's mischaracterization of the rebellions and the threats they represented to white workers, [19] Reagan and other right-wing politicians seized upon these uprisings along with activists' increasingly militant opposition to the Vietnam War to liken city streets to "jungle paths after dark." [20] Brown

After its popularization by the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Lowndes County Alabama, the Black Panther was adopted by Black freedom and civil rights organizations across the country. This included the succession movement of Watts in the year following the 1965 uprising.

feebly attempted to address such concerns, including collaborating with local white capital to cut government funds to welfare rights and anti-poverty groups that had been allotted via the programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity and other grassroots grant initiatives. [21] However, he was easily outflanked by Reagan and his ilk who cast the Republicans as the "law and order" party that could mop up the mess that Brown and other moderate Democrats left in pursuit of President Johnson's war on poverty. New blood would be needed.

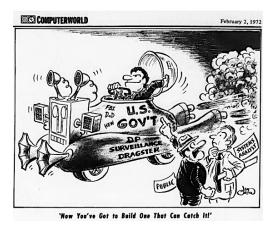


THE BODY OF MATTHEW JOHNSON, 16, shot to death by a San Francisco policeman, is carried out after funeral services. 1000 attended the Hunters Point funeral.

Police occupation of Black neighborhoods across the North and West spurred the waves of police brutality and subsequent rioting and rebellion that white reactionaries like Brown and Reagan later latched on to. One such act of brutality was the murder of Matthew Johnson as he ran away from police in the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood of San Francisco in 1966. The San Francisco police attempted to crack down on potential rioting through typical fascist tactics including marching up to the local community center where dozens of children were hiding and shooting right in through the windows. Hardly a month earlier, in San Jose, a police officer beat a 24-year-old Black man to unconsciousness for the crime of having his car break down by the side of the road. Three days later after this same officer beat a 14-year-old Mexican boy, local Chicana activist Sofia Mendoza exclaimed, "How can this happen? Do you have a police force or a Gestapo?

From his first term in 1967, Reagan's welfare reform plans moved to take advantage of the counties' dissatisfaction with having administrative responsibility over a welfare system that remained largely beyond their control. [22] The goal, beginning with the development of the Uniform Welfare Information System of 1966, would be to study, define, and rationalize all state and county welfare processes through a unified electronic data processing system. [23] Of course, California was not alone in the push to expand uses for computers—previously only a military technology—into civilian governance during this period. [25]

Reagan's turn to computing as a putative "solution" to the crisis instigated by the Welfare Rights Movement can be situated in the context of a broader appeal within dominant U.S. political culture to computing technology as a means to resolve all manner of so-called "crises." For example, as explored by Jennifer Light in *From Warfare to Welfare*, the "urban crisis" of rioting and increasingly militant protesting against race and class oppression inspired a ready expansion



"Now you've got to build one that can catch it." A political cartoon from a 1972 issue of *Computerworld*, depicting the uphill effort to match government regulation to an already well-established surveillance-military-intelligence computing infrastructure



A 1971 political cartoon from *Computerworld*, depicting the dream of data processing (DP) professionals that they be able to contribute to the public good through their work.

of computer applications into the fields of city management, police operations, and urban renewal—derisively called "Negro removal" by activists. Throughout the early 60s computing technologies were readily adopted by some of the nation's most populous cities, from Los Angeles to New York,[25] with smaller cities and towns eager to join the movement.[26] This was achieved through partnerships forged between defense "experts" and state government leaders, both of whom stood to gain from the transfer of military technologies to "civilian" contexts. While for state actors the application of computing technologies to city and state management was perhaps a means of consolidating power under the guise of techno-scientific objectivity, for military contractors it represented an opportunity to

"diversify markets, to profit from the growth of federal domestic spending, and to keep their institutions in operation for the long term." [27]

But despite this contemporaneous expansion of computing into various administrative contexts and despite Reagan's own enthusiasm for leveraging new technologies to manage what was derisively dubbed the "Frankenstein monster" of the vast and winding welfare bureaucracy, [28] little progress was made on the Uniform Welfare Information System before the budget item was completely deleted. Dissatisfied with this lack of progress on the issue, Reagan pushed the welfare issue in earnest during his second term, proposing an increasingly expansive vision of welfare reform and automation. Beginning in August of 1970 with a secret task force of state officials, most of whom were "purposely chosen for their lack of familiarity with welfare," several initiatives were developed to combat rising welfare caseloads, which were a direct result of Black women activists' concerted organizing throughout the 60s. The task force's mission was to get costs, "fraud," and error under control. [29]

The task force's first initiative involved another complete restructuring of the state's plan for a uniform welfare information system. The new plan would involve not only a system for batch processing and managing information on all welfare cases and their characteristics at the state level, but it would also establish an online, nominally real-time system that would link the state with all 58 county welfare offices. Reagan's new appointees, none of whom were experts in the technology, imagined a computer system with the reliability to satisfy the following "needs":

- the mandated information–reporting requirements of the state and federal governments;
- the speed to allow the state and the counties to assimilate, store, and rapidly access data about individual cases; and
- the flexibility to permit complete data interchange and comparison between the counties, and
- the complete automation of the eligibility and grant determination process statewide.[30]

CW Photo Feature by V.J. Farmer



Afips Cowgirls polled attendees reactions.



Vicke Stewart, 12, shows how easy it is to operate a Digitronic 200 printer.

These may sound like a set of largely trivial tasks today in our era of desktop computing, cloud processing, and user-friendly data management software. But all of this was still being dreamed up in 1971. There were no computers that were not gigantic and based in central locations, and much programming was still being done on very minimal text-only terminal displays. Consequently, data entry and updating would have to be done on dummy terminals without independent processing power in each of the county offices. This would then require a dedicated staff for sorting, entering, and flagging for correction the rapidly changing —often extremely complex —information regarding each individual case, the individuals to whom each case was linked, and their data points. Finally, once this information was entered and re-entered into the database maintained at the state's central mainframe system, another dedicated staff of computer professionals and secretarial staff would be required to check over this information again, maintain its compatibility with information coming in from other offices, and ensure reliable data transfer back to the counties and up to the state welfare department, the legislature, and the federal government in both regular and specially requested reports. In such a system of information processing, there are many opportunities for error, miscommunication, and overall breakdown in the chain of command.[31] In real-time systems—which, at this time, had only been implemented by large organizations like big banks and airlines—the question of human error would become more and more impossible to ignore.

Yet, despite the substantial technical and organizational problems that pervaded such proposals, computation was nevertheless enthusiastically heralded as a panacea for the "crisis" of the welfare system at this moment. One explanation for this enthusiasm perhaps lay in the financial rewards that politicians stood to gain from funneling public funds into private hands through multi-million-dollar hardware, software, and analysis contracts. The shrewd public servant stood to make a pretty penny off of the rapid growth of the industry, with the federal government alone spending over \$1.9 billion on computer salaries, services, supplies, and site preparation costs in 1969.[32] At the time, the industry's growth rate was second only to aerospace manufacturing, another primary industry for the war-centric cities of the California coast.[33] Meanwhile U.S. imperialist outposts in Israel,[34] Mexico,[35] Hawaii,[36] Native American reservations,[37] South Africa,[38] Canada[39] and South Vietnam[40] were investing in their first computers as some of the largest industries in the U.S. were betting on automation against increasingly militant unions.[41]

"Computers, like Coke, are beginning to turn up everywhere," observed a 1969 article on the installation of the first computer in the British neocolony of Barbados. The article continues, presciently, "It's a sure sign that soon it will be impossible to get away from them anywhere." [42] Likewise, the tech industry's goal was never "efficiency in government"—despite the high-minded rhetoric of



United Airlines shows how you too can load your own container for

Images from the 20th annual Joint Computer Conference in Las Vegas. In the conference's keynote, Arthur G. Anderson, Vice President of IBM, noted that unless social needs were met and computers met socially useful functions, "We're in trouble." Surveying the audience with blond women dressed as "cowgirls," the hosting organization, the American Federation of Information Processing Societies (AFIPS) and Time Magazine released a poll saying that 49% of U.S. adults had on-the-iob contact with computers and 30% had direct or indirect contact with computers as part of their current jobs. In a telegram after the proceedings, President Nixon congratulated them on the conference's theme of "computers and quality of life," saying that the theme "reflects the challenge of the next 20 years." Make that at least a hundred, Dick.

some of their internal debates—but profit.[43] Technology companies such as Space General Corporation and Arthur Young and Company received hundreds of thousands of dollars to continue producing overly vague and congratulatory reports for the state, with the legislature repeatedly giving the go-ahead on a nearly impossible task. These companies told politicians and program administrators who wanted to appear tough on welfare fraud and rising caseloads exactly what they wanted to hear. In turn those politicians continued to ask for technical systems either beyond their capacity or their budgets as determined by the legislature.

With this broader momentum in favor of computerization and Reagan's full support at their backs, the California Department of Social Welfare's (DSW) new management was able, within two months, to essentially bully the Department of Finance into approving the proposal for a statewide computerized welfare management system. [44] Despite objections from counties like Santa Clara that maintained their own extensive welfare computing systems, the DSW then released a public call for proposals from interested computing systems contractors. Such companies would have only thirty days to return a detailed plan to the state, essentially ruling out any but the largest and most flexible technology companies of the time. Only three made the review committee's final cut at the end of November.

But by then the Department of Finance, the Legislative Analyst's Office, and several of the county governments had raised their voices louder in opposition to the entire project. They took issue with the competitiveness of the vendor selection process, the feasibility of the proposed system, and the role of the counties in both funding burden and administrative control. Even Reagan could not fight the rest of the executive branch on system implementation. Thus, by January of 1973 the project was officially dead with no more funding possible or recommended by any other governmental unit.



companies and the government hoped to poach dissatisfied or recently laid off American programmers through this 1971

advertisement in Computerworld

The Office Mechanization Center The Computer Center of Israel Government looks for professionals experienced in management in: - Operation of a computer unit - Systems Programming - Programming The Office Mechanization Center operates IBM computer model 370/165 candidates asked to send resumes to: Office Mechanization Center P.O. B. 13016 Jerusalem Israel

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JUMP CUT

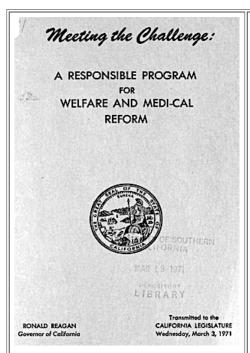
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

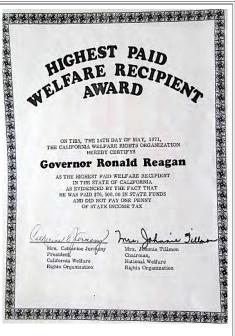


: In his campaign for re-election, Reagan handily defeated Democratic challenger Jesse Unruh, in part by ignoring his opponent and focusing only on the issues which would inflame his base.

A shot in the dark

With these more expansive projects dead in the water, primarily due to the state's own mismanagement, the only true hope for welfare automation and systematic "fraud control" came in an ad hoc assortment of much more limited, yet still expansive fraud control systems. Chief among these was the Earnings Clearance System (ECS), a direct product of the Welfare Reform Act of 1971, which Reagan would hail as "the most comprehensive reform of welfare attempted any place in the United States." [45] In a summer of often tense negotiations with the leading moderates of the Democrat-controlled state legislature, the Welfare Reform Act passed for the most part intact. Meanwhile, the issue of fraud control also played much more directly to the anxieties of the white, middle- and upper-class voters who swept Reagan easily to re-election the previous year. [46] [open endnotes in new window]





The publication in which Reagan published his welfare reform proposal was called "Meeting the Challenge: A Responsible Program for Welfare and Medi-Cal Reform." At his May 1971 attempt to pitch the reform plan to the public for the first time at a meeting sponsored by the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, Reagan was confronted by a contingent of welfare rights activists. Breaking through the crowd Catherine Jermany, president of the California Welfare Rights Organization offered him an award. Co-signed by Johnnie Tillmon, chairman of the NWRO, the framed certificate named the governor as the "highest paid welfare recipient in the state of California," referencing a recent story showing that he had paid "not one penny" in state income tax in the previous year, despite his substantial salary from the state.

However, the issue was not fraud itself, which was necessarily impossible to grasp in full, as my discussion below of the ECS's technical infrastructure will elaborate. Rather, at issue was the state's animus towards working-class women and their social movements that had swelled the welfare rolls. In short, ECS reproduced and further criminalized the poverty of welfare recipients while cloaking this



With Democratic cooperation, Reagan's welfare reform plan passed largely unscathed. Democratic Speaker of the California Assembly Robert Moretti would recall, "We had no desire to protect the goddam welfare cheats. We were just as glad to get rid of them as [Reagan] was." No doubt this was the reason Moretti excluded more liberal Democrats from final negotiations even as Reagan leaned on his team of idealogues.

oppression in the language of improved government efficiency and transparency. If one wished to avoid even the risk of being sanctioned for unreported income, the "honest" recipient would be forced to work longer and harder to survive on the little they were given, even as rampant inflation ate up more and more of the grant. These women thus lived—and remain—at the very razor's edge of working life; any wrong move or bout of common bad luck threatens to push them and their families into homelessness, prison, or the foster care system.[47]

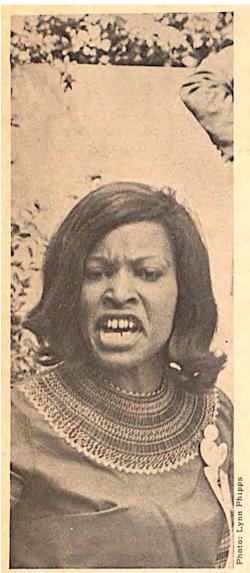
When combined with increasingly strict requirements passed by county, state, and federal governments throughout the late 60s that forced recipients to work to keep their welfare benefits—even for no extra pay or with no option to turn down an undesirable job-the ECS enacted an additional social cost. [48] Under conditions of heightened criminalization and austerity in social welfare, the women with whom one might otherwise share the last of one's food to ensure that all of a community's children made it through the month might, instead, be tempted to report other women to the welfare office for this or that personal infraction. Such sanctions promoted isolation—even from those in a shared class position—and aimed to disrupt both the overall movement for welfare rights and the everyday sense of solidarity among the poorest sector of the working class. What comes to matter is not "our rights," but "my case." Collective struggle becomes individualized. By providing the state with the infrastructure to link forms of information about its constituents, technology companies were—and continue to be-necessarily complicit in the engineered counterinsurgency against the gains of the Welfare Rights Movement.

In this regard, the policies that determine the administration of welfare and other contentious government programs have always been political and ideological rather than simply technical. As Virginia Eubanks argues in her study of contemporary digital surveillance systems,

"Technologies of poverty management are not neutral. They are shaped by our nation's fear of economic insecurity and hatred of the poor." [49]

Yet these technologies are also shaped by the self-conscious radical political activity of the poor. Though Eubanks does not spend much time on the subject, historians of welfare and anti-poverty movements of this period like Premilla Nadasen and Annelise Orleck have shown that this struggle over the terms of poverty and state capacity was, in Stuart Hall's terms, clearly an effort on the part of poor women and their communities to stop "the society reproducing itself functionally, in *that* old way." [50]

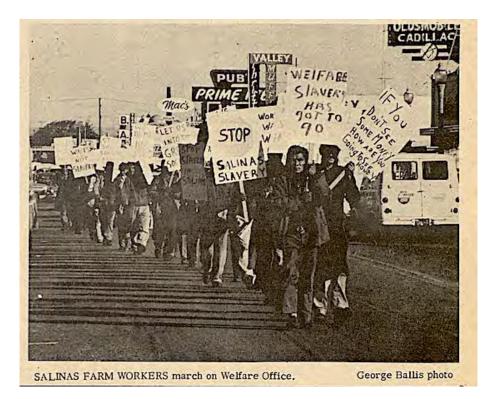
While this ideological struggle cannot substitute for practical revolutionary activity, it complexly reflects the fundamental class antagonism between the working classes of the world, the circumscribed capitalists of oppressed nations, and the capitalist imperialists of the West. Thus, the seemingly technical debate over the form of U.S. social welfare institutions cannot be separated from the more clearly ideological debate over its function. The capitalist state's attempt to develop what Eubanks calls "the Digital Poorhouse" is only one more part of this multifaceted class struggle since the 1960s.



An angry Katherine Himes, of Richmond Welfare Rights, speaking at a caucus of the poor at the CLR conference in West LA.



Burroughs 3500 Computer System Promotional Image ca. 1966. Via the Computer History Museum, https://www.computerhistory.org/revolution/digital-logic/12/278/1444



The Welfare Rights Movement was broad and multiracial, including both the welfare rights activities of poor farm workers and their advocates in rural areas and of Black women in urban areas like Richmond, Oakland, and Bayview-Hunters Point.

With the assent of the legislative and executive branches of the state government, the ECS began development soon after the Welfare Reform Act's passage. It went through its first test runs that November. With a much more limited technical scope, this system would only require quarterly comparisons of two databases: first, the master list of all welfare recipients maintained by DSW and, second, a record of earnings for employees in the state maintained by the Department of Human Resources Development. The list of welfare recipients would be based on reporting from the welfare departments of all 58 counties, thereby requiring no further reporting burden on the counties. Earnings records would be based on information reported by all employers in the state and include the social security numbers (SSN) of every legally reported employee. [51] At the state's central data processing center, likely using the Burroughs 3500 mainframe computer maintained at the welfare department's headquarters in Sacramento (Figure 3), these two lists would then be compared by SSN and provide a linked list of every welfare recipient in the state at a given time who was also known to have been legally employed at that time.[52]

In further operations this list would then need to be sorted by the income value reported by the employers; broken into chunks based on the county value of a recipient's case; and printed onto hardcopy or recorded on magnetic tape, either or both of which would be returned to each of the 58 county welfare departments. The county welfare department, with the cooperation of local police departments and district attorneys' offices, would then be required to investigate the ten percent of recipients in their county with the highest earnings over \$610 who had been on welfare all three months of that quarter. Given the political circumstances, however, counties were allowed—and in fact encouraged—by the state to investigate everyone on the list to the extent that local resources allowed. These investigations might, finally, lead to either criminal cases, fines, and benefit cutoffs or orders of repayment (Figure 4).

Click here to see sample ECS report from a 1977 training manual. Reproduced in Fischel, Michael, and Lawrence Siegal. "Computer-Aided Techniques Against Public Assistance Fraud: A Case Study of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) Program." McLean, Virginia: Metrek Division, The MITRE Corporation, January 1980. https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/catapaf.pdf

Approached even from a purely technical standpoint, the ECS was still quite an undertaking given the limited resources available for computer operations—purchasing, running, maintaining, and replacing the two-car-garage sized machines—within the state government. A seemingly trivial computing operation requires millions or even billions of individual calculations. Thus, while an operating system, or OS as we know it today, may be able to coordinate the processing needs of several users in a real-time system, in a batch system such as ECS it is the *politics* of organizational resource management that ultimately determine which calculations are done when and what hardware, software, or labor the data center might invest in to facilitate those calculations. For the office managers in Sacramento, this meant that however much time, human labor, and money it took, on average, to generate the list of recipients for investigation, these variables could be regularly compounded by several factors completely outside their control. For example:

- a new executive order or bill changing welfare eligibility or grant level calculations and, thus, the composition and ordering of the list;
- an injunction filed by the state Superior Court stopping some regulation or other, thus also affecting the composition and ordering of the list; or
- budget directives and audits by the Department of Finance forcing them to lay off 'unnecessary' staff or sell 'excess' computer time even if it might be useful at some point in the future.

SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT

VERN E. HAKOLA

Partner
Touche Ross & Co.
Los Angeles, California

Many computer installations are contributing to the success of the company they support. In spite of this fact, top management and EOP management frequently is unsatisfied and critical of the management practices for data processing. This presentation will discuss Systems Management—the Why and How of systems planning, project development, project control, operations management, user involvement—with a view toward a more professional and less technical approach to management of the data processing activity.

MINICOMPUTERS IN THE DP FACILITY - A MATTER OF VALUE

ROBIN T. OLLIVIER

Vice President Sierra Data Systems South Pasadena, California

Mr. Offivier will present notions of systems design using distributed processing elements, discuss the role of software in small machines and review present muddle-through operations.

Multiple processor installations will be discussed and actual systems analyzed. Grosch's Law will be vigorously refuted and the (computing) world will be put to rights.

Y FOYER

4C COMPUTER RESOURCE MEASUREMENT AND ITS APPLICATION

MARIO M. MORINO

Director of Program Products PACE Applied Technology, Inc. Arlington, Virginia

With the ever increasing attention being given to the cost-effective utilization of expensive computers and their operating systems, resource measurement has become extremely important. This presentation will cover approaches to resource measurement, including hardware/software monitors and resource information systems. The current use of these tools will be presented, specifically identifying how the resultant information can be applied.

USER LOOKS AT COM

TOM KIDWELL

Chief Deputy Treasurer & Tax Collector County of Los Angeles Los Angeles, California

Do you have a computerized file with extensive paper output? Pressed for space? Require a large quantity and variety of information at your fingertips?

This user will share with you how these problems were solved through the use of Computer Output on Microfilm (COM) and achieved savings of \$83,000 annually.

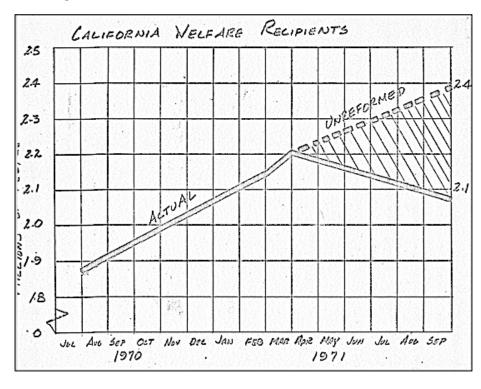
Computer companies took advantage of how in-depth these organizational transformations were by hosting conferences like the 1972 Western Systems Conference in Los Angeles for data processing (DP) professionals and systems administrators. The request for approval of training form from the LA Department of Public Social Services explained the reasoning for sending the 18 listed systems analysts and managers: "It will provide advance concepts methods and techniques in the system analysis and design through technical seminars led by renowned leaders in the field."

By estimations from the program's first year, it might then take at least six months to return the list to the county welfare department and even longer for them to do anything with it. Here too, what matters most is not the specific technical capacities of the computers used by welfare bureaucrats, but rather the politics of resource management, the labor conditions of the various county workers involved in making use of reports, the coordination between the criminal justice units and the welfare department of county governments, and, finally, the living and working conditions of welfare recipients. However, such fundamentally political questions were deftly sidestepped by an administration intent on using computers—and, as I show in the following section, a dominant ideology of computers—to wage war against the poor.

Common sense transparency

Crucially, it was precisely by reference to the technical elements of ECS that the state was able to maintain the legality of this system and move toward implementing other fraud control systems across its various social service programs. More specifically, ECS was proven legal through an appeal to the technological and, in particular, to the double character of computerized information as allegedly immaterial *and* transparent. Whereas a previous welfare system in Nevada that involved extensive checking of an applicant or recipient's testimony about their assets, income, and living situation was deemed unconstitutional, ECS was distinguished by reference to the transparency of computation and "information" in the abstract. Key here was how the distinction between measures understood as governmental invasions of privacy (e.g., the

Nevada system) versus those understood as acceptable forms of technological "management" was premised on an imagination of computation as non-invasive and non-manipulative.



This chart was developed by the Reagan administration's press department in justifying the need for the Welfare Reform Act of 1971 and its Earnings Clearance System. By their estimates the welfare system would "spiral out of control" without making use of such computational and state resources, the use value of the information the system generated.

It was also this distinction that activists from welfare rights organizations sought to challenge. Only two months after the system was first begun in earnest, the San Francisco Neighborhood Legal Assistance Foundation (NLAF) filed an injunction against ECS on behalf of the Golden Gate Welfare Rights Organization of San Francisco (GGWRO). GGWRO was one of at least 15 local welfare rights organizations in San Francisco alone and a collaborator with the several other welfare rights groups based in Oakland, Richmond, and elsewhere throughout the state. Drawing on the judgement against Nevada's system for overstepping the privacy of welfare recipients, NLAF and GGWRO argued that ECS went around recipients' backs to determine their eligibility for welfare. However, as the California Third Appellate Court argued in overturning the injunction, insofar as ECS only involved the state accessing "its own records" the computer system could not be understood to perform any material and potentially violating actions against welfare recipients. In other words, the "record" was construed here as merely an inert piece of state property that could be accessed at will while still maintaining respect for "the applicant's or recipient's constitutional, statutory, and civil rights" and without "harass[ing] him or violat[ing] his privacy and personal dignity."[53]

In the Court's ruling, ECS was therefore characterized as a benign operating system that transparently surveyed and integrated information that was already available to state agencies. And yet, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has cogently observed, such a conflation of computation with transparency is

"remarkably at odds with the actual operations of computation: for computers to become transparency machines, the fact that they compute—that they *generate* text and images rather than merely



In 1975, for example, welfare rights activists joined with students and organized labor in Sacramento to demand jobs, collective bargaining rights, and an end to austerity. Unfortunately, most organized, militant welfare rights activity had been defeated by 1975, leaving instead state sponsored benefit education campaigns. [Click image to see large.]

represent or reproduce what exists elsewhere—must be forgotten."[54]

In the case of ECS, this ideological disavowal of the computer's capacity to compute allowed the state to have it both ways. On the one hand, records from the executive's departments were designated as fundamentally *immaterial*, inert, and unchanged and unchanging after their encounter with the computer's operating system; they could therefore be integrated with ECS at the discretion of the state's departments. To defend the legality of ECS, the Court thus proposed an implicit understanding of "information" as an abstract form entirely separate from the concrete person or people that it references.

On the other hand, this same information was of course linked to—and, indeed, constitutive of—the very personage of the welfare recipient and their corresponding case. That is to say, to defend the practical necessity of ECS, the state's representatives and the Court appealed to an interpretation of "information" that directly contradicted the line of argumentation in defense of ECS's constitutionality. Here, information was rendered not immaterial, but rather uniquely poised to make visible and transparent the material lives of welfare recipients. Linked through the special systems embodied in ECS and further computerized welfare systems, information, it was argued, provided the ultimate means to uncover, know, and hence readily correct fraud, abuse, and error within the welfare bureaucracy. Specious claims of cost saving, of efficiency, and of crime control were all based on such an interpretation. Otherwise, there would be no necessity for the ECS's computer operations required to generate the reports and investigations initiated each quarter.



In the summer of 1971 as the Reagan administration and the California Democratic Party hammered out the details of the welfare reform program, Chicano/a activists marched all the way from Calexico at the California-Mexico border to the capitol as part of La Marcha de la Reconquista. Welfare and education cuts were joined with police brutality and the Vietnam war in their list of concerns. The governor refused to meet with them, having gone on vacation just a couple of days before when the Welfare Reform Act was passed.

What the political and legal history of ECS reveals is that "information" finds its value in the repression and control of the bourgeois state's class enemies. *This* was the fundamental "crime" of the Welfare Rights Movement that required the development of technological systems aimed at punishing the poorest sectors of the working class. Welfare recipients—by banding together into mass organizations and demanding an end to poverty—argued that the state had a very real role to play in the constitution of both labor markets and the sphere of social

reproduction. They supported strikes by radical social workers and the unity of their cause with that of all the unemployed, disabled, and economically surplused, whether those groups liked them or not. It was the state's heft and material substance in their lives that led them to balk at the racism and sexism of caseworkers and to seek out the welfare office when economic downturns and super-exploitation left them out of work and with few places left to turn. By contrast, what the state's argument in favor of ECS presented was a vision of government completely unmoored from the interests of poor workers, who were posited only as externalities to a perfectly functioning and efficient apparatus with entirely neutral and unobtrusive objectives. Through this technocratic logic of transparency, the entire political and economic basis of struggles over welfare was masked, and what emerged instead was a narrow debate over the right tools and technologies necessary to get caseloads under control.

And so, although ECS was touted as the technical means to make that which was previously invisible (i.e., welfare recipients) visible to the state, in effect the system offered a cover that rendered invisible the neoliberalizing state's attack on welfare recipients and their social movements: a state that was, itself, imagined to be as light and immaterial as the "information" on which it operated. Such was the argument offered in 1974 by Robert Carleson, who had overseen Reagan's welfare reform program before taking a post in the Nixon's Department of Health, Education, and Welfare based on his "achievements" in cutting California's welfare programs. [55]

In a luncheon address, Carleson made clear his belief that the reason for declining welfare caseloads across the country was because New York and other larger states were adopting some of California's tighter eligibility standards and cracked down on welfare loopholes that previously allowed "those who are not truly needy," like those with outside income, from receiving welfare in the first place. [56] This crunch on the "most privileged" recipients would continue throughout the following decades, with Reagan's bragging about having "lopped 400,000 off the welfare rolls" and the need to crack down further on the "welfare queens" during his 1976 presidential campaign, leading invariably towards Bill Clinton's movement to "end welfare as we know it" in 1996.[57] Thus, for the state and for capital, the question was never what welfare ought to do or even how it really functions in our society. Recipients and their unions were the ones that fought explicitly on this ideological terrain. Rather, the state and capital narrowed this ideological struggle, making the only question what means (and media) would get us to where they had already decided to go

Conclusion

Let us ask what happens then to the recipient whose employer coerces them into an under-the-table pay arrangement and, through this, routinely steals their wages while giving them just enough to stick around. This is not a hypothetical. It is a situation faced by real women drawn much more intimately into the circle of state supervision through the ons-and-offs of a million transistors at the prodding of a capitalist-dominated political machine. Such a woman is more at the mercy of a vindictive landlord or neighbor who threatens to turn her in to the welfare department, just as she is unable to fight the wage theft or fully extricate herself from the circuitous bureaucracy of the welfare department and its caseworkers. If she is disabled, if she lives in public housing, needs food stamps or Medicaid, or is an immigrant, she and her family are that much more vulnerable. And thus, she is that much more incapable of finding the footing on which to fight for her rights as a worker and mother. To be a welfare recipient is to take on the burdens of both positions and, with this, the class interest in the overthrow of the entire political and economic system as it currently exists.

Since the development of computerized welfare administration systems in the late



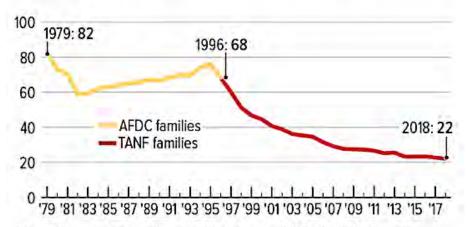
This illustration comes from an article in SNCC's California newspaper, *The Movement*, called "Corporations on the Dole." The heft of the state had already been well established in its service to the capitalists, whether through back alley deals or massive subsidies and tax breaks.

1960s, the U.S. state has used the legal basis in favor of ECS to expand its tracking and its attempted control of food stamps, Medicaid, SSNs, interest earnings, and retirement, survivors' and disability insurance programs, alongside new methods for tracking duplicate or suspicious cases across state and county lines.[58] The state, through these technological systems, thus manages the production and reproduction of the working class. In this, management is the equal and opposite motive force toward solidarity and anti-capitalist organization—not among the much-vaunted factory workers, but the marginal workers whom the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense co-founder and theorist Huey P. Newton called "the unemployables," their ranks swelled by automation and economic displacement. [59] Welfare recipients, the homeless, currently and formerly incarcerated people, the undocumented, and the like all swell this economic stratum as they struggle for dangerous, insecure and poverty wage jobs at the very bottom of the global economy. Meanwhile the necessary work that must be done in a humane society is outsourced to the not-yet-post-industrial Third World, whittled away through "labor saving" technology, or completely ignored as irrelevant or "too costly." The Welfare Rights Movement, like the National Union of the Homeless that followed it, was an attempt to organize these marginal workers and develop a society that might provide for their interests instead of the capitalists that ECS and systems like it were designed to serve.

Even as uniform welfare information system efforts floundered throughout the twentieth century—California is only now successfully working to finally join all its local welfare programs under one system as I write this—fraud-control programs became that much more influential. Though the caseload did not significantly shrink in California—indeed poverty has worsened in that time—such systems "worked" insofar as they made working-class women more vulnerable and thus more controllable as a specialized reserve army of labor. If the computer offers these administrators a path "from a view to a kill," as Derek Gregory has argued in the context of drone warfare, [60] it is only as part of the overall profitgeneration strategy of the businesses that manufacture and market them using the labor of welfare recipients, poor immigrants, prisoners, former peasant farmers, and other workers at the very bottom of the global economic ladder.

TANF's Reach Declined Significantly Over Time

Number of families receiving AFDC/TANF benefits for every 100 families with children in poverty



Note: TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Source: CBPP analysis of poverty data from the Census' Current Population Survey and AFDC/TANF caseload data from Department of Health and Human Services and (since September 2006) caseload data collected by CBPP from state agencies.

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES I CBPP, ORG

Cash assistance programs today reach less people in need than they did in 1979. And those who are reached are contracted out for forced labor arrangements with no consideration for their or their children's lives.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. Johnnie Tillmon as quoted in Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 108–9 Orleck takes the quote from Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 225. [return to page 1]
- 2. For a thorough overview of Tillmon's organizing in relation to Black Power and Civil Rights, see Premilla Nadasen, "'We Do Whatever Becomes Necessary': Johnnie Tillmon, Welfare Rights, and Black Power," in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, and Dayo F. Gore (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 322.
- 3. Nadasen, "We Do Whatever Becomes Necessary"; Allison Puglisi, "Identity, Power, and the California Welfare-Rights Struggle, 1963–1975," *Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2017): 14.
- 4. Nadasen, "We Do Whatever Becomes Necessary," 324.
- 5. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, Updated, Subsequent edition (New York: Vintage, 1993), fig. Source Table 2: AFDC Caseloads in Urban Counties for Selected Years since 1950 (in hundreds).
- 6. Premilla Nadasen, Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States (New York: Routledge, 2005), xviii.
- 7. Here I am pointing to the parallel between the argument offered by Tillmon in 1972: "There is an important point for women to remember when they fight for quality universal child care [sic]. Be careful that your enthusiasm doesn't get used to create a reservoir of cheap female labor. Because that's who's going to be working in those child care centers—poor women. ... Institutionalized, partially self-employed Mammies—that's what can happen to us" See Johnnie Tillmon, "An Activist's Classic Take on the System," Ms., August 1995. I draw as well on contemporaneous articles on the economic role of day care, "The concept of day care, whether one agrees with it or not, emerges out of the very real conflict between the needs of the family and the demands of the economy," florika and gilda, "The Politics of Day Care," Women: A Journal of Liberation, Winter 1970, Independent Voices.

Such arguments are also not so different from the groundbreaking Marxist feminisms of Alexandra Kollontai and Claudia Jones or of more recent movements taking up similar banners like the National Union of the Homeless whose founders directly cite the welfare rights movement and its participants as inspirations and mentors. See Alexandra Kollontai, "Working Woman and Mother," trans. Alix Holt, Marxists.org, 1916, https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1916/working-mother.htm; Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the

Problems of the Negro Woman!," in *Claudia Jones Beyond Containment: Autobiographical Reflections, Essays, and Poems*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies (Banbury, Oxfordshire, UK: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, 2011); and Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann, *Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty*, The Teaching for Social Justice Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011). In short, reforms at the level of social reproduction are necessary, but not sufficient for the liberation of oppressed women workers or anyone driven into the ranks of the "unemployables" separate from broader, race-mediated, class struggle.

- 8. For a brief overview of the "generations" of computers, see Frank da Cruz, "Computer Generations," *Columbia University Computing History*, January 2001, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/computinghistory/generations.html.
- 9. On the competitiveness of the industry at this time, see AnnaLee Saxenian, *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 84–104.
- 10. See Tara McPherson, "U.S Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and Unix," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 21–37; Lisa Nakamura, "'I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked': Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media," ed. Laine Nooney and Laura Portwood-Stacer, *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 2014): 257–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546845; Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Race and/as Technology, or How to Do Things to Race," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (Routledge, 2013), 38–60.
- 11. Karen J. Hossfeld, "Their Logic Against Them': Contradictions in Sex, Race, and Class in Silicon Valley," in *Women Workers and Global Restructuring*, ed. Kathryn B Ward (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 1990); Karen J. Hossfeld, "Hiring Immigrant Women: Silicon Valley's 'Simple Formula," in *Women of Color in U.S. Society*, ed. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 65–93; Christian Zlolniski, "The Informal Economy in an Advanced Industrialized Society: Mexican Immigrant Labor in Silicon Valley," *Yale Law Journal* 103, no. 8 (January 1, 1994), https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylj/vol103/iss8/9; Clair Brown, Greg Linden, and Jeffrey T. Macher, "Offshoring in the Semiconductor Industry: A Historical Perspective [with Comment and Discussion]," *Brookings Trade Forum*, 2005, 279–333; Christian Zlolniski, *Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists: The Lives of Mexican Immigrants in Silicon Valley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006),

https://www.degruyter.com/isbn/9780520939172; Lisa Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (December 15, 2014): 919–41, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0070.

- 12. See John Smith, "Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century," *Monthly Review* 67, no. 3 (July 1, 2015), https://monthlyreview.org/2015/07/01/imperialism-in-the-twenty-first-century/.
- 13. See Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 86 (April 2014): 55–72.
- 14. Ursula Huws has spent many years discussing the question of digitally mediated, often home-based, or otherwise individualized labor and the limits of separating these workers from the broader class struggle, see Ursula Huws, *Reinventing the Welfare State: Digital Platforms and Public Policies*, FireWorks (London: Pluto Press, 2020). For a broader survey of the question of digital labor

- and its relation to the production process and wage labor, see Christian Fuchs, "Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet," *The Information Society* 26, no. 3 (April 30, 2010): 179–96.
- 15. For an example of this tendency, see Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018).
- 16. See Martha E Gimenez, "The Feminization of Poverty: Myth or Reality?," in *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction Marxist Feminist Essays* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2019), 210–33.
- 17. Stephen Menendian and Samir Gambhir, "Racial Segregation in the San Francisco Bay Area, Part 2: Racial Demographics" (Berkeley, CA: University of California at Berkeley, Othering & Belonging Institute, February 6, 2019), https://belonging.berkeley.edu/racial-segregation-san-francisco-bay-area-part-2.
- 18. See Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, 1st Da Capo Press ed (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997); Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 66–79.
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- 20. Ronald Reagan, "Taped Announcement on Candidacy for California Governor," *American Rhetoric*. https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreagancalgovcandidacy.htm.
- 21. See "Fund Nix; Group Fit to Fight," *Berkeley Barb* (Berkeley, CA: Max Scherr, August 12, 1966). "Brown Abandons Poor, Welfare Group Claims: State Head's Resignation Draws Fire," *Desert Sun*, August 19, 1966, California Digital Newspaper Collection. "Raucous Capitol Meeting: State Welfare Board Refuses to Resign," *The Sun*, August 20, 1966, Final edition, sec. A, California Digital Newspaper Collection. Becky Mills, "The Welfare World: Brown Deserts Welfare; Welfarists Desert Brown," *The Movement* (San Francisco, CA: SNCC of California, September 1966).
- 22. See California Counties Welfare Modernization Task Force, "Public Welfare: Time for Change," Final Report (Sacramento, CA: County Supervisors Association of California, April 1, 1970), Box 1, California Social Welfare collection of reports, newsletters, and other materials, Collection no. 0440, California Social Welfare Archives, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.
- 23. David Dery, *Computers in Welfare: The MIS-Match*, First Printing, Managing Information 3 (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1981), 22–32.
- 24. On the origins of the Bay Area technology industry, see Christophe Lécuyer, *Making Silicon Valley: Innovation and the Growth of High Tech, 1930 1970*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) and AnnaLee Saxenian, *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128* (Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 25. Jennifer S. Light, From Warfare to Welfare: Defense Intellectuals and Urban Problems in Cold War America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,

- 2003), 55-91.
- 26. "Small Cities Will Go EDP in Five Years," *Computerworld*, June 18, 1969, Internet Archive.
- 27. Light, 64.
- 28. Bill Stall, "Debate over the 'Reagan Years' Will Go on and On," *The Sun-Telegram*, December 15, 1974, sec. A, California Digital Newspaper Collection.
- 29. William Crafton, "The Incremental Revolution: Ronald Reagan and Welfare Reform in the 1970s," *Journal of Policy History* 26, no. 1 (January 2014): 30–34.
- 30. Dery, Computers in Welfare, 51–72.
- 31. The 1971 learner's manual for Santa Clara's Case Data System warns as much: "In the Welfare Case Data System, information is entered on forms by people; these forms are key punched into machine readable form by people; the computers are operated and programmed by people. *PEOPLE MAKE MISTAKES*. Therefore, in any computer-based system, mistakes are to be expected. This system is no exception." Quoted in Dery, 120.
- 32. CW Staff Writer, "Government EDP Operations Will Amount to \$1.9 Billion," *Computerworld*, March 19, 1969, Internet Archive.
- 33. "Five-Year Industry Growth Second Only to Aerospace," *Computerworld*, January 22, 1969, Internet Archive.
- 34. "Jerusalem Confab, Ifip '71 Near," *Computerworld*, August 11, 1971, Internet Archive; Office Mechanization Center, "The Office Mechanization Center," *Computerworld*, August 11, 1971, Internet Archive.
- 35. "Computer Firm Opens in Mexico," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 11, 1971, California Digital Newspaper Collection.
- 36. Ronald A. Frank, "Hawaii-to-U.S. Link: Satellite 'Moves' Pineapples," *Computerworld*, February 2, 1972, Internet Archive.
- 37. "Surplus Computers to Bolster Indian Power," *Computerworld*, February 2, 1972, Internet Archive.
- 38. Bohdan O. Szuprowicz, "Despite Apartheid, Non-Whites Make Inroads in South Africa," *Computerworld*, November 24, 1971, Internet Archive.
- 39. "Canada Cites 'Important DP Role,'" *Computerworld*, August 11, 1971, Internet Archive.
- 40. Bernice Pantell, "DP in Vietnam: A Multilingual Environment," *Computerworld*, February 2, 1972, Internet Archive.
- 41. "Scientist Warns Farmers to Get Ahead of Unions," *The Movement*, March 1966, Independent Voices.
- 42. "Barbados Gets First Computer," *Computerworld*, June 4, 1969, Internet Archive.
- 43. The 20th annual Joint Computer Conference, for example, had the theme "Computers and Quality of Life," which President Nixon praised as reflecting "the challenge of the next 20 years." While conference presentations and keynote speeches gave some attention to the potentially negative impacts of technology on minorities, presenters, including "industry pioneers," remained virtually

unanimous on the need to continue investing in computing to help solve both domestic and international problems, from "social upheavals" to war and freeing individuals from "demeaning drudgery." See CW News Staff, "17,000 Attend 'Smaller, But Better' FJCC," *Computerworld*, November 24, 1971, Internet Archive; Edward J. Bride, "Public Feels DP Affects Us All, Government Regulation Seen," *Computerworld*, November 24, 1971, Internet Archive; Michael Merritt, "Better DP Support 'Needed' by Emerging Nations," *Computerworld*, November 24, 1971, Internet Archive; CW Staff Writer, "DP Modeling Crucial to Understanding, Solving Many International Problems," *Computerworld*, November 24, 1971, Internet Archive; Edward J. Bride, "Joint 'Veterans' View Progress, Urge DP Community Onward," *Computerworld*, November 24, 1971, Internet Archive; CW Staff Writer, "Self-Justification or a Search for Quality of Life: Anderson," *Computerworld*, November 24, 1971, Internet Archive.

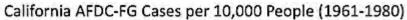
- 44. Dery, Computers in Welfare, 56-67.
- 45. UPI, "Legislators Move Welfare Bills Through First Tests: Amendments Delay Medi-Cal Passage," *Desert Sun*, August 11, 1971, California Digital Newspaper Collection.
- 46. Totton J. Anderson and Charles G. Bell, "The 1970 Election in California," *The Western Political Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (June 1, 1971): 252–73, https://doi.org/10.1177/106591297102400205. [return to page 2]
- 47. See Gustafson, Cheating Welfare.
- 48. For an example of the negative impacts of the earliest "workfare" programs, see Richard Zall and Richard Betheil, "The WIN Program: Implications for Welfare Reform and Jobs Organizing," *Clearinghouse Review* 13 (1979-1980): 272.
- 49. Eubanks, Automating Inequality, 22-23.
- 50. Hall, Stuart. "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-structuralist Debates." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 2 (June 1, 1985): 113. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038509360070.
- 51. John A. Svahn, "For Immediate Release," Press Release (Sacramento: State of California Department of Social Welfare, December 30, 1971), Box: P32, Folder: Issues-Welfare (3 of 3), Reagan, Ronald: Gubernatorial Papers, 1966-74: Press Unit, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitallibrary/gubernatorial/pressunit/p32/40-840-7408628-p32-012-2017.pdf; Jack Cooper, "For Immediate Release," Press Release (Sacramento: State of California Department of Social Welfare, April 4, 1972), Box: P32, Folder: Issues-Welfare (3 of 3), Reagan, Ronald: Gubernatorial Papers, 1966-74: Press Unit, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitallibrary/gubernatorial/pressunit/p32/40-840-7408628-p32-012-2017.pdf.
- 52. The Legislative Analyst's Office provides a brief overview of the computing resources available to the welfare department in the 1971 budget analysis. See "Analysis of the Budget Bill of the State of California for the Fiscal Year July 1, 1971, to June 30, 1972" (Sacramento: Legislative Analyst's Office, March 1, 1971), 681–82.
- 53. Quoted in Janes, Carleson v. Golden Gate Welfare Rights Organization Inc.
- 54. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge," *Grey Room* 18 (2004): 27, emphasis in original. Intriguingly, the same logic used to legitimate ECS is still used to justify computational administrative technologies, including in the area of policing. For example, in her

- discussion of The Matrix, "a multistate program [pioneered in 2004] that sifts through databases of public and private information ostensibly to find criminals or terrorist," Chun notes that "supporters claim that the Matrix simply brings together information already available to law enforcement" (45).
- 55. "Welfare Boss Gets New Post," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 1, 1973, California Digital Newspaper Collection.
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- 57. "Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *The New York Times*, February 15, 1976, sec. Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1976/02/15/archives/welfare-queen-becomes-issue-in-reagan-campaign-hitting-a-nerve-now.html. See also John O'Connor, "US Social Welfare Policy: The Reagan Record and Legacy," *Journal of Social Policy* 27, no. 1 (1998): 37–61.
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- 59 Huey Newton, "Intercommunalism (1974)," *Viewpoint Magazine*, June 11, 2018, https://www.viewpointmag.com/2018/06/11/intercommunalism-1974/.
- 60. Derek Gregory, "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7–8 (December 1, 2011): 188–215, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411423027.

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120 places to go this week—see page 40

WHY LOS ANGELES DID NOT RIOT - YET

PAGES 3 & 5

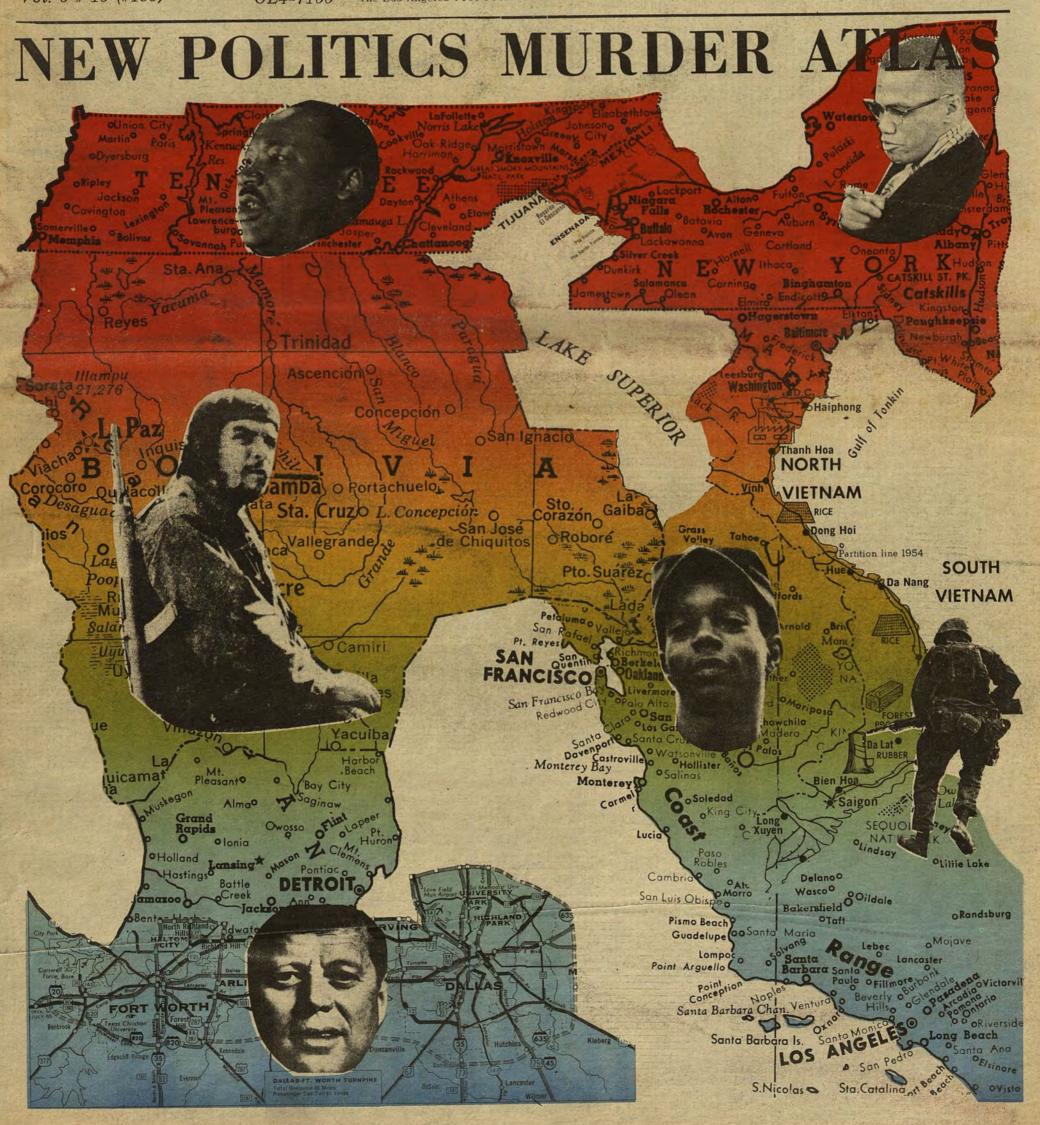
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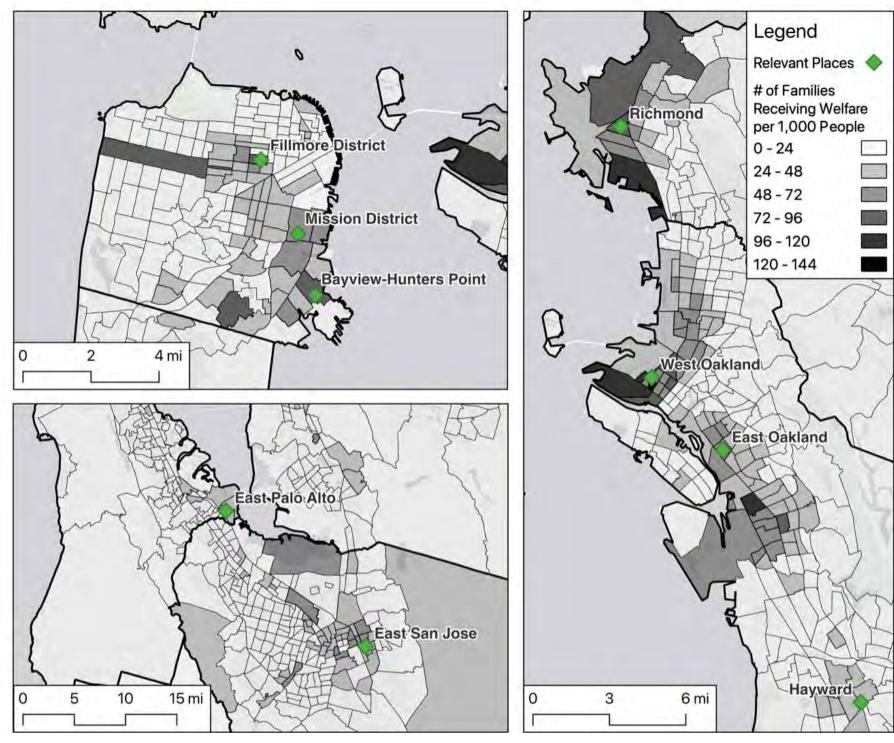
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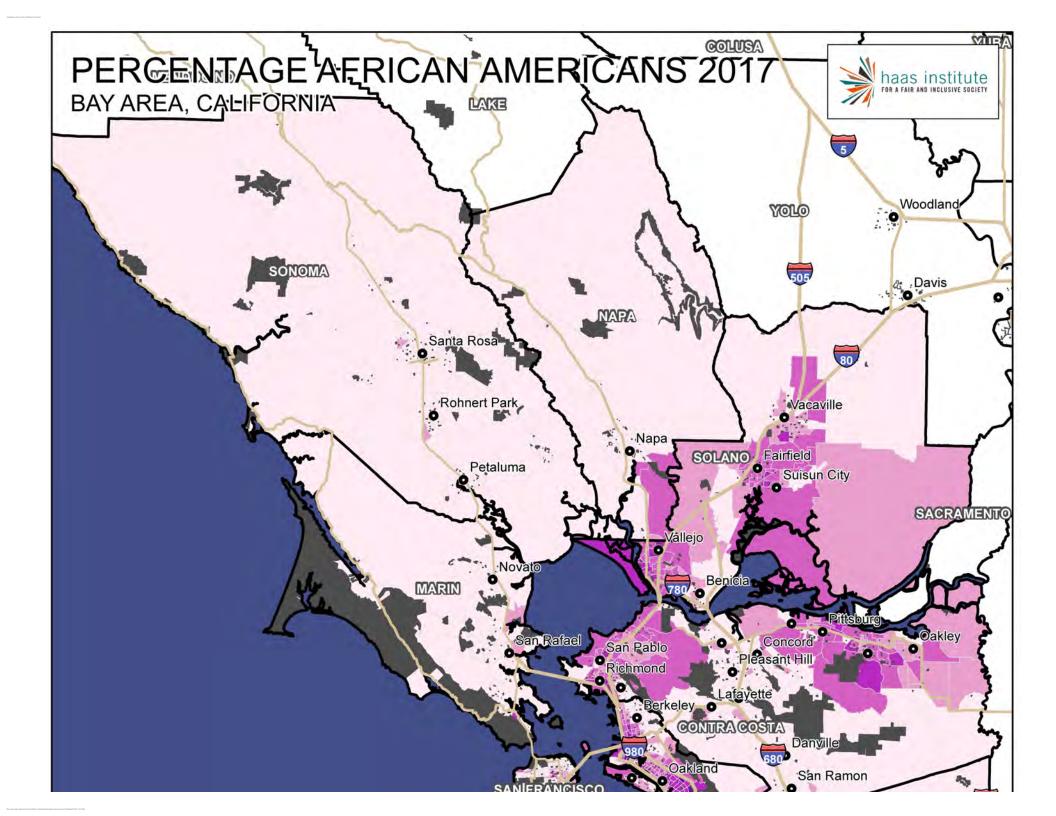
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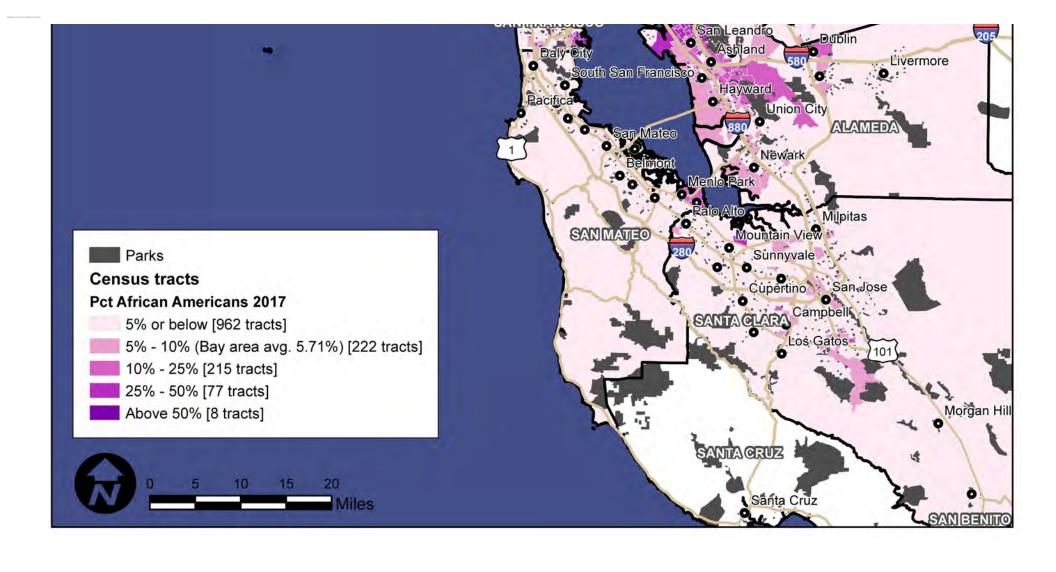
\$5.00 PER YEAR

April 12, 1968



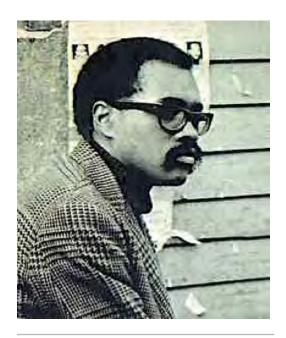






JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Movie Review

Goldfinger

reviewed by

He is a coamission of fine liquors, the wests custimitative durity, speaks several languages. He is chaining at the cockini hour, responds the most saudic manness in districtions on it, horses, hooks, and sex. He is the most incredible agent ever decimed up in the wishful fantasies of the Western mind. Agent 607 is about the closest thing to a superment that her Majesty's got going. And go he does. First, he single-handedly quelles a latin-American revolution; kills an attacker (saw his reflection in the eye of this chick that he is about to serve) by electrocuting him. He than trans up in Misoni to save a rich sucker from falling deeper into dieth with GOLDFINGHH le serves Goldfinger, eithek, but Goldfinger gets revenge by having Bond canded Karate style-by an orion-tal valut and what the you know the girl tal valet and what do you know the girl turns up painted in gold--yes gold.

do his duty for the Queen, the United States and his insatiable sex drive. Somehow, thelieve that they need this kind of here. I understand the James Bond films are very popular, especial-ty among the culturally "hip" popular, of a part of the property of the part of the part of the organization of the part of the p

Rint of here. Innerestant are JohanBond films are very popular, especially among the culturally "hip" popular
ofay set.

For has not the chief pursuit of
American society been that of ploasure? A rampantly hedonistic impulse
nervades all areas of her culture. And
has not the society ceased to participate collectively in healthy arisatic
experiences (as if it ever did not? is
not Bond's popularity another ayapton
of a dying culture which is rotting
away because it is devoid of humanistic content and purpose.

And, yes, her raction, it intrades
again, this time the lunding or some
other "brathen" race have been replaced by the mainland Chinese. But
"love" conquers all. The West telmarks because Purse Galure needs

Disruptive nationalisms: aesthetics, markets, and the anti-audience of Black media

by Richard Purcell

This essay[1] [open endnotes in new window] returns to a pivotal moment in the late 1960s and early 1970s to explore how media-makers and activists aligned with the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and Black Power Movement navigated the tension between the need to attract "audiences" for the purposes of cultivating resistant forms of Black subjectivity and the need to combat forces of mainstream commodification. I argue that Black Power-aligned media-makers' theorizations of Black aesthetics carry with them an emergent discourse about the creation of and the changing market for Black art in an age of media's massification during the second half of the twentieth century. More specifically, I posit that within these discourses an anxiety emerges over the commodification not only of the Black artwork but also of a Black audience for this artwork. Such commodification comes into conflict with the central ideological and political work of radical Black Power politics of collective self-determination outside of—and in resistance to capitalism. And that resistance is expressed both through cultural nationalism and various kinds of transnational and intercommunal visions that emerge out of Black radical thought during this historical moment.

Put another way, the dilemma then facing Black Power-aligned media-makers and artists is this: Can "the technology of the oppressor," to borrow Huey P. Newton's phrasing (Newton 9), be harnessed towards reproducing and expanding a counter-hegemonic community? For BAM and Black Power-aligned artists, the question captures their ambivalent engagements with mass media.

Such media has the goal of capturing audiences and so forms what the media theorist Dallas Smythe will call at the end of the 1970s "the audience commodity." In his essay, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," Smythe defines the "audience commodity" as the commodity produced during media consumption, specifically through the creation of audiences to sell to advertisers. Smythe argues that advanced capitalism is what he called a "consciousness industry" (1).[2] One of the most important mass-produced goods of advertisersupported communications during late-twentieth century monopoly capitalism is, in fact, "audiences and readerships" (3). But the time people spend watching and reading is also a fraught and capricious time. As Smythe puts it, the laborer, in reproducing labor power, "might be responding to realistic conditions which may on occasion surprise and disappoint their advertisers" (6).

Ultimately, for Smythe, the political significance of the audience commodity does not lie in the traditional Marxist concept of the alienation of workers as they produce commodities in general. Instead, it resides in

We are talking about a New Way.
We are talking about making "new gods."
One of the problems of the movement
for human rights has been its inability
to project new and more powerful
symbols. Failing to project a unique
cultural point-of-view, the movement,
until recently, floundered in a white haze
of contradictions. The most important
contradiction was in the movement's
tendency to hope that the establishment
communications media would present
a truthful picture of Afro-American reality.

Larry Neal: Black Arts Movement icons were intensely interested in perils of "first world cinema" as seen in the writings of Larry Neal. Click on image to see his review of *Goldfinger* in the pages of *Liberator* Magazine (1964). Also, here is the opening of his 1968 essay "Film and the Black Cultural Revolution."





Amiri Baraka's *The New-Ark* (1968), which was co-directed by Larry Neal.

"the alienation of workers from the means of reproducing themselves" (7).

For Smythe, the means of reproducing oneself is not just the rest we do between each workday. Instead, such unorganized time has political potential. However, when the aggregate of viewer/readership is transformed into an "audience," the value of such surplus time, which can be used for cultivating revolutionary ideas, gets captured by capital (7). Smythe's essay was published in 1977, almost a full decade after the height of BAM. But I would venture to say that his political-economic analysis of the "audience commodity" already concerned the emergent Black Power-aligned media-makers.

What connects Smythe to BAM and Black Power intellectuals and artists, in particular, is their shared interest in what audience formation could usurp—that is, the potentially revolutionary use of surplus-watching/reading-time. For the intellectuals and artists examined in this article, like many other artists and media-makers in the post-1968 period, the social activities of reading and viewing constitute key sites of struggle over the reproduction or, alternatively, the capture of Black radical and revolutionary collectivity.[3] Unleashing this surplus time from its capture by capitalist mass media, they argue, is a vital step towards a larger political goal: using mass media to seize the means of capitalist social reproduction. To advance this aim, Black artists and media-makers have explored whether the formulation of a Black Aesthetic—and the insertion of this aesthetic into mainstream media—can disrupt late-stage capitalistic mechanisms of audience formation to create another object: an *anti-audience* whose attention is freed from reproducing capitalist structures of labor time and consumption practices.

Generally speaking, the BAM emerged out of a series of disparate local and often grassroots organizations of Black artists and intellectuals that began to emerge in the early 1960s and that expanded after the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. It is primarily associated with Amiri Baraka's formation of the Black Arts Repertory Theater of Harlem, but there were in fact a multitude of Black arts organizations across the United States, including in cities like Philadelphia, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Oakland, and Chicago. BAM challenged the literary and critical movements of the New American Poetry, the New York Intellectuals, and the New Criticism primarily through establishing an alternative body of publishing venues for Black writers as well as developing critical methods and terms to assess the work of these same artists. This dominating trinity was, in part, what Amiri Baraka, Hoyt Fuller, and others would call "the mainstream" of literary style, intellectual culture and criticism. However, while BAM artists formulated their critique of the mainstream in relation to dominant literary institutions, what has been critically underappreciated is their focus on mainstream media institutions like television and cinema. In contrast, not only did Larry Neal and Don L. Lee write film reviews in the pages of Black World and The Liberator but, as I will discuss, Neal and Baraka saw cinema as a key form in



Film screenings were an important part of how the Black Aesthetic and its revolutionary potential were represented. Both *The New-Ark* (1968) and *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) were billed as "Black Movies" in this 1969 issue of Newark's *The Black News* newspaper.

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COMMUNICATIONS: BLINDSPOT OF WESTERN MARXISM

Dallas W. Smythe

The argument presented here — that western Marxist analyses have neglected the economic and political significance of mass communications systems — is an attempt to start a debate, not to conclude one. Frequently, Marxists and those radical social critics who use Marxist terminology locate the significance of mass communications systems in their capacity to produce "i'deology" which is held to act as a sort of invisible glue that holds together the capitalist system. This subjective substance, divorced from historical materiality, is similar to such previous concepts as "'ether"; that is to say, the proof of its existence is found by such writers to be the necessity for it to exist so that certain other phenomena may be explained. It is thus an idealist, pre-scientific rather than a pon-scientific explanation.

In "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism" (1977), Smythe defines the "audience commodity" as the commodity produced during media consumption, specifically through the creation of audiences to sell to advertisers. Click on image to see large.

BAM aesthetics to counter on a mass scale the "cultural imperialism of...white communictions media" (Neal, 350). In so doing, Black Power-aligned artists and media-makers contested "the mainstream" as the dominant media platform for the attention of Black people.

Despite conflicting accounts of the BAM, all agree that the Black Aesthetic describes an intertwining of Black liberation with aesthetics. Yet a fraught "blind spot" in contemporary Black Studies' assessments of the Black Aesthetic has been the tendency to largely ignore BAM and Black Power-aligned artists and critics' rigorous interrogations of the relation between the ideology of Black liberation and the political economy of mass media. For this reason, I enter into a discussion of the Black Aesthetic through the writing and editorial work of Hoyt Fuller. There are a number of reasons why his approach to the "Black Aesthetic" is crucial within the context of an emergent Black Arts Movement. Arguably, Fuller is one of the first intellectuals to emerge out the BAM who attempted to manage the material, aesthetic and political complexities involved in merging avant-garde Black ideas within mass culture. [4] For this reason, Fuller's role as editor of Negro Digest/Black World—a mass circulation magazine within the John H. Johnson Publishing empire of the 1960s—and his attempts to disseminate the ideas of a "Black Aesthetic" on a national (and perhaps global) scale make his engagement with the Black Aesthetic a crucial place to start.

Here I trace Fuller's cultivation of this concept of the Black Aesthetic within the pages of the magazine Negro Digest/Black World and its reappearance in the commentary around Melvin Van Peebles' film Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971). While Fuller only implicitly addresses the relation between the commodification of the art object and the commodification of the audience in his editorial decisions for Negro Digest/Black World, we see a more direct engagement with the audience commodity in the critical reception of Melvin Van Peebles' Sweet Sweetback's Baadasss Song. By describing how Fuller, Van Peebles, and others engaged the problem of producing an audience for a "Black Aesthetic" across two important mass media forms—the magazine and the cinema—I seek to emphasize the unavoidable problematic that inextricably links two levels of struggle—that is, ideological struggles over aesthetic and political representation with political economy issues, on the one hand, and dealing with the evolving function of media at a crucial moment of late-stage capitalism.

Discussions of the Black Aesthetic amongst BAM artists and intellectuals after 1968 thus offer an explicit theorization of the contradictions that emerge between the formation of Black radical community through mass media and the formation of a Black audience. This fact has invaluable bearing in our contemporary platform era of late-stage capitalism media consumption, a point which I will further elucidate at the article's conclusion. As I will show, Fuller, Van Peebles, and others saw the potential of cultivating a Black "anti-audience" through print, cinema and other mechanisms of mass media. The idea that emerges from Fuller and the debates around Van Peebles' film is that the representation of Black struggle via a Black Aesthetic is not determined by the mechanisms of audience capture. Although their efforts were medium-specific (print magazine vs. cinema), both Fuller and Van Peebles attempt to use the mechanisms of audience capture against itself.

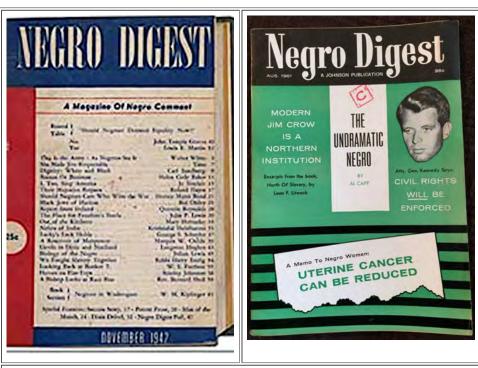
The imperative that Black Power-aligned media-makers constitute and address a Black collective subject finds itself in tension with the capitalist imperative to



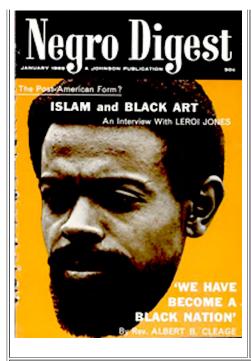
Sweetback's New York premier was an indication of the growing success of Van Peebles' film. Cinema was an especially important medium for Van Peebles because he argued that it could be shielded from what he calls the "racist economic pressures" that plague television and other advertising-sponsored modalities of mass media.

mine and constitute new subject positions for consumers, including Black consumers. BAM's theorization of a Black Aesthetic unfolds against and in opposition to the commodification of avant-garde tactics. It presents an alternative imagination of a Black aggregate belonging that oscillates between cultural nationalism and broader forms of proletarian and transnational left solidarity. The Black Aesthetic is not just a style or mode of representation but requires a kind of vocational work by way of Black participation in an alternative "attention economy" cultivated for revolutionary purposes. The anxiety expressed by artists and theorists of Black Power-aligned media occurs at the juncture between the desire to advocate for a collective act of participation within this alternative "attention economy" and the risk that a wider dissemination of the Black Aesthetic through mass media will reproduce the audience commodity. It is this ambivalence that I track in this essay.

The Black Aesthetic against the audience commodity



First published in 1942, *Negro Digest* was presented as a "Black" version of *Reader's Digest*.





Fuller and Johnson's revival of the magazine in 1961 and eventual evolution of the magazine into *Black World* mirrored its shift into a key outlet for the Black Aesthetic.

In 1961, John H. Johnson, the founder of the Johnson Publishing Company and publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, asks veteran journalist Hoyt Fuller to revive *Negro Digest*. First published in 1942, *Negro Digest* is presented as a Black *Reader's Digest*. Yet, instead of a Black version of the middlebrow conservatism of *Reader's Digest*, Fuller and Johnson's revival becomes perhaps the most widely circulated outlet for what the historian of Black literary and print culture James Smethurst has described as

"high-level African American political commentary and cultural expression aimed at a black audience" (208).

Especially after 1965, Fuller pushes *Negro Digest* towards an intellectual engagement with both the Black Arts and Black Power movements—a shift that will also occur at other Johnson-owned publications. Fuller's interest in Black Power and Black Arts is a hallmark of his intellectual development towards Kwame Nkrumah's Marxist Pan-Africanism, as well as a recognition of the impact of desegregation and decolonization on Black political consciousness. In this sense, the 1961 relaunch of *Negro Digest/Black World* is unique. While the majority of John H. Johnson's Black magazines are traditional, advertisement-driven publications, with Hoyt Fuller's second run of *Negro Digest/Black World* a decision is made to make it a "commercial" free periodical, which means Johnson decides that the magazine will not place advertisements within its pages, which is a radical departure from the 1943-1961 run of this and the rest of Johnson's publications.

Johnson himself cites the rise of the Civil Rights movement as well as lack of "ready outlets" for Black writing as his impetus for relaunching *Negro Digest/Black World*.[5] Also, Johnson is staking the magazine's financial success on the legitimacy Fuller already earned amongst BAM artists as well as from the more community based, grassroots publishing and political work Fuller did in Chicago in the 1960s.[6] But as Albert Kreiling and James Hall both state, the absence of advertising does not necessarily mean *Negro Digest/Black World* is free from Johnson's intentions to monopolize Black readership across his various magazine properties, which one could easily describe as an effort at audience



LITERARY LIONS AND VALUES

HERE IS a spirit of revolution abroad in the shadowy world of letters in black America. Not all black writers are attuned to it, of course, and some are even opposed to it, which is to be expected also, one supposes. Great change is always to be expected also, one supposes. Great change is always terrifying, especially to those who have found niches in the established structure and wish to remain secure. But change is upon us. There is, therefore, a wide divergence of opinion among black writers as to their role in society, as to their role in the Black Revolution, as to their role as artists—all these considerations tied into, and touching on, the others. Negro Digest polled some 38 black writers, both famous and unknown, asking the 25 questions which are published on page 90. The questions elicited from the writers opinions relative to the books and writers which have influenced them, the writers who are "most important" to them in terms of achievement and promise, and what they think about the new movement toward "a black aesthetic" and the pre-occupation with "the black experience," aspects of the larger Black Consciousness Movement. The replies from the writers are extraordi-

10

January 1968 NEGRO DIGEST

narily rich, and no attempt will be made in this issue of the magazine to collate and analyze all the material. Rather, pertinent statements from the questionnaires are published on these pages, dealing primarily with the last dozen questions, along with a general essay intended as back-around and temperature.

-MANAGING EDITOR

directed toward "humanity," which is indisputable, but when "humanity" is interpreted as wearing a white face, then what is the black writer's alternative? If the black audience does not constitute "humanity," then what audience does?

On page 49 of this magazine is a quote from a review by Louis Simpson, a white poet, of Gwen-

Hoyt Fuller. Fuller's desire to recognize and cultivate the humanity of his audience informed many of editorial decisions he made in *Negro Digest/Black World*. Click on "Literary Lions and Values" text to see it large.

segmentation. Johnson rehires Fuller to develop a Johnson property antithetical to the advertisement-driven layout and content conventions of *Jet* and *Ebony* Magazines and one that actively published and elaborated the "Black aesthetic" under the market imprimatur of Johnson's commercial publication cache. Such a business move shows that Johnson had designs for *Negro Digest/Black World* that sought to capitalize on growing Civil Rights unrest. This is done, to a certain extent, as part of a media format war to further coopt Black readership away from Black weekly newspapers and into Johnson's own publications, which market an aspirational Civil Rights agenda within its content tethered to advert-driven Black access to the U.S. marketplace.[7]

Fuller's reinvention of *Negro Digest* unfolds within a wider context; there is an explosion of Black-owned presses dedicated to engaging an alternative market for Black art, especially avant-garde art and criticism. And the explosion of Black-owned presses and alternative aesthetic markets occurs here within the emergence of a wide-variety of alternative and underground presses as well as media during the Long Seventies.[8] For example, in 1965, the Detroit-based Black artist Dudley Randall founds Broadside Press. Poet Haki Madhubuti follows Randall two years later and founds Third World Press in 1967. It is also during this period that a string of Black Arts inspired journals and magazines, such as *Liberator*, emerge around the flourishing Black arts and intellectual scene.[9] However, while Broadside and Third World Press explicitly reject Black popular culture in favor of a mix of cultural nationalism and Black avant-gardism, Fuller explores the possibility of cultivating a readership for avant-garde aesthetics within the context of popular print media.

Specifically, Fuller is experimenting with how to bring into being an imagined aggregate Black subjectivity for BAM's "Black" artwork and Black aesthetic within commercialized mass media. Fuller's editorial staff publish predominately Black writers all along the ideological spectrum throughout his run with *Negro Digest/Black World*, although those that appear the most are the luminaries of the BAM. And while poetry dominates its pages, *Negro Digest/Black World* gives an incredible amount of space to book reviews and cultural criticism during the height of its influence from 1968-1971 (Thompson 243-244).

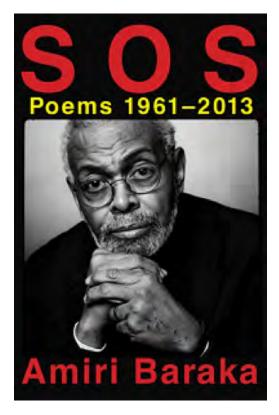
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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The collected poems carry the title of a signature poem that summons a radicalized Black subjectivity. Baraka worked in an avant-garde mode in poetry and theater.

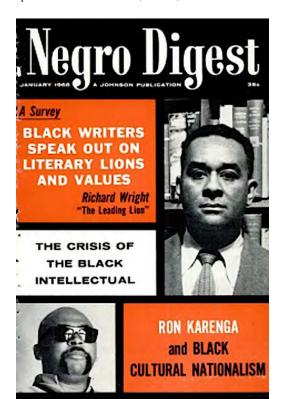
Arguably, Negro Digest/Black World's cultivation of this readership is made possible by the BAM's conception and formal production of a specifically "Black" art. As Margo Natalie Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins suggest, the emergence of "Black" art is not only a product of the whole spectrum of poetry and fiction workshops, theater groups and other art collectives that emerge throughout the 1960s but also an explicit liberation politics that understands the "inseparability of the ideological and the aesthetic" (Collins and Crawford 11).

This is one way to read the hailing to the reader that happens in so many poems of the Black Arts Movement. Amiri Baraka's "SOS," published in Black Art in 1969 but composed between 1965 and 1966, is one of his most anthologized and reproduced poems precisely because it embodies such hailing through title, verse, allusion and form. The effect of Baraka's "SOS" is to summon a radical, racialized aggregate that we find amongst a wide swath of works, from the dialectical "You" in Nikki Giovanni's "True Dialogue" to Don Lee's "for black people (and negroes too)" (Harper, 40). In all of these hails, an aggregate Black subjectivity is summoned. The "call," the "you" or the "Black people" of these poems, however, are not offered up to as readers whose leisure time is for sale. Instead, Baraka's SOS, as well as these other poems, use the Black aggregate "the people" hailed through a Black aesthetic to disrupt and resist the audience-commodity formed through the book and other print media forms. As Crawford argues, BAM artists engage in textual performances that create an "anti-text," that is, writing styles that are "too action-orientated" to be contained and embodied in a conventional commodity form (193). And, with such a disruption, came the promise of the reader's identification that halts the transformation of culture into capital and replenishes a revolutionary self.

Indeed, the 1960s marks a moment when Black publishers—and not only Black artists—recognize that the reader's (or the watcher's) time has use value in anticipating the development of political consciousness. The question then is how to navigate the cultivation of a Black aggregate subject through the mass media in ways that refuse the reproduction of a commodified Black audience. In this regard, Fuller seeks to position *Negro Digest/Black World* as a mass-produced object that is also a fugitive space where a collective Black subject can reproduce itself.

The conscientious cultivation of reading practices can be one way to understand how Fuller steers *Negro Digest/Black World* towards the fostering and dissemination of a Black Aesthetic, where attention capture is directed not at the creation of the audience commodity but at an attempt to use surplus time to frustrate the creation of an audience. This can be seen in the format changes that the publication undergoes during the mid-60s. Prior to that moment, early content of *Negro Digest/Black World* is in the conventional digest format, which means reprinting pieces from middlebrow magazines from the early 1960s such as *Atlantic Monthly* and Johnson's own *Ebony*. However, beginning in 1964, Fuller begins to move *Negro Digest* away from this format, in part, by shifting the content of the magazine to feature both well-known and emerging Black

"writers, artists and intellectuals not to conspicuously display their qualifications and 'success' but rather to utilize and evaluate their diagnosis of American cultural ills" (Hall 198).



Hoyt Fuller's desire to recognize and cultivate the humanity of his audience informed many of editorial decisions he made in *Negro Digest/Black World*. Click on image to see full size.



A young Alice Walker was one of the authors that responded to Fuller's survey. Click on image to see what she wrote.

A prime example of these format changes that I argue cultivate an anti-audience is the January 1968 issue of *Negro Digest/*Black *World*. The issue features reviews by Don L. Lee as well as a debate between James Cunningham and Ron (Maulana Ndabezitha) Karenga about the relationship between Black Nationalism and Black artists. Most notably, thirty-four pages of the issue are given over to a "Writer's Symposium" as well as "Negro Writers' Conferences—The Dialogue Distorted," a reprinted chapter from Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. The symposium is created from the written responses to a survey that Fuller sent to thirty-eight Black writers "both famous and unknown" (*Negro Digest*, 10). Fuller and the editorial board publish edited versions of the answers each writer provides and Fuller writes up a small introduction to the symposium title "A Survey: Black Writers Views on Literary Lions and Values" (*Negro Digest*, 10) In his survey, Fuller asksed writers what they think about

"the new movement toward a black aesthetic' and the preoccupation with the 'black experience' aspects of the larger Black Consciousness Movement" (Negro Digest, 10).[10] [open endnotes in new window]

The respondents range from then canonical writers like Gwendolyn Brooks and Saunders Reading, to lesser known ones (at the time at least) like Alice Walker and S.E. Anderson, and key theorists of the Black Aesthetic like Larry Neal and Addison Gayle.[11] Given the wide range of authors and responses, it is impossible to discern anything like political consensus on the critical question about a Black aesthetic as well as the relation between Black experience and art, which is what primarily motivated Fuller. While there was general agreement that something called a "Black Aesthetic" exists, nothing remotely approaching a collective definitional consensus can be determined from the symposium. For every Larry Neal, who suggests that a Black aesthetic already exists but rejects its "formalization," and for every less sanguine observation, like those of Alice Walker and Saunders Redding, who make more universalist and less racialist claims about the literary imagination, most responses are like that of John O. Killens, who provides less of a definitive answer than a suggestion that

"the materials of most Black writers come out of the Black experience, it would seem that a Black aesthetic would be a most viable and fruitful one for the Black artist" (31).

The collective radical assertion of a Black aesthetic returns us, at best, to the universalist conundrum of the relation between aesthetics and experience. Hoyt Fuller, whose commentary on the writer's responses is formatted so that it weaves throughout the symposium section of the issue recognizes this lack of consensus.



Don L. Lee's review of *Sweetback* in *Negro Digest/Black World* echoed BAM's anxieties over popular cultural forms. Click on image to see first page of his review.





Staged scenes that depicted anti-state violence

Fuller writes that there is an "alternating desire for assimilation and separation" amongst the polled writers, who, on the one hand

"are committed to the truth as reflected through the prism of their own experiences...and those who have adjusted their vision...to the guidelines established by people who...are historically and culturally placed in a position which demands that the validity of the unshared experiences be denied" (23).

As Kinohi Nishikawa suggests, perhaps Fuller's balancing act in *Negro Digest/Black World* is his attempt to present, within the pages of John H. Johnson's mass circulation periodical, the radical energy of Black radical aesthetics within the garb of middlebrow "literariness" (Nishikawa, 156). This is very different than the intimate, local Chicago readership of *Nommo*, a smaller journal Fuller edited at the same time he was working for *Negro Digest/Black World* in the late 1960s.

Through his efforts to present radical ideas in the 1968 issue, Fuller is attempting to use *Negro Digest/Black World* to create a "counter-mood" for the masses through the mass medium of the print magazine.[12] In so doing, Fuller attempts to usurp an already commodified mass media outlet and repurpose its material function within the broader corporate capitalist structure of Johnson Publishing. Yet Fuller's efforts are perilous and uncertain, balancing between the contemporaneous political emergence of Black radicalism and cultivating a readership that can meet the critical demands of aesthetic experimentation at the same that he has no sense of how his readers/audience are using the space, ideas, or "mood" he is creating for them.All of this unfolds within the context of a magazine that, while avoiding the compromises that come with advertising-driven audience formation, nevertheless is constrained by the limited resources Johnson has provided in order to maintain *Negro Digest/Black World*'s "prestige" place in the Johnson Publishing empire.

Sweetback as the "answer to the oppressor's technology"?

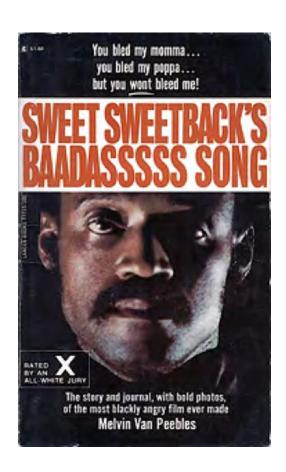
If BAM writers and critics see print media imbricated in the emergence of late capital's media apparatus and position a Black Aesthetic against the audience commodity, the growing, racialized audience-segmentation of U.S. film and television means that cinema is an even more intensely fraught medium for Black Power-aligned media-makers. As Kevin Bell, Armand Towns, Lars Lierow and Whitney Strub have shown, there are discernable ties between post-68 BAM artists and theorists to media philosophy, telecommunications critique, and filmmaking. BAM artists have been, since the mid-1960s, engaged with the connection between film and "the Black cultural revolution." [14] It is for this reason that the incredible popularity of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* (1971), Melvin Van Peebles' concerted embrace of "Black aesthetic" discourse, and the subsequent emergence of "Blaxploitation" become focal points for the contradictions that artists and activists are feeling within their struggles over Black audiences within the attention economy.

It is hard not to read into the origin story of Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweetback* the looming and vexed political and aesthetic debates that would accompany the film's release. Van Peebles publishes the shooting diary for *Sweetback*, entitled *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* in 1971, not long after the film's premier in March.[15] The original publisher, Lancer Books, specializes in genre fiction, mostly science-fiction, soft-core pornography and queer erotica. The film, he tells his readers "was about a brother getting the Man's foot out of his ass,"

and resonated with those seen in journalistic and televisual outlets during the racial uprisings post-1968 were a hallmark of *Sweetback*.



Sweetback's opening title sequence foregrounds its exploitation genre roots as well as the misogyny many Black critics would read into the film



"ENTERTAINMENT WISE. A MOTHERFUCKER," and "couldn't be a didactic discourse which would end up playing...to an empty theatre" (68).

At the time, *Sweetback* was Van Peebles' latest yet his most radical attempt in the U.S. to represent Black life on screen that resonated with the emergent energies of Black Power and the Civil Rights Movements and against the Hollywood social problem film of the 1950s and 1960s. The director subsequently distances himself from the very Blaxploitation cycle of films that *Sweetback* inaugurated. Yet Van Peebles uses many of the very same financial, distribution, and promotional strategies employed by grindhouse and exploitation film producers to produce *Sweetback*—techniques subsequently adopted by the New Hollywood; these include merchandise preselling, four-walling, and producing films based on taboo or highly politicized themes. At the center of this is Van Pebbles' appropriation of the imagistic discourses of Black Nationalism in his film. These strategies raise important questions about the translation of Black Power content into an industrial mode of communication integral to white supremacy. They also raise questions about the possibility of mass-distributing "revolutionary" cinema in the late-1960s and 70s that embody a "Black aesthetic." [16]

Announcing its political proclivities, *Sweetback* begins with a flash-forward freeze frame of Van Peebles running out of a long tunnel with an intertitle announcing,

"This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man."

Van Peebles plays the role of protagonist Sweetback, a sexual wunderkind who works at a stag show hosted at a brothel in Los Angeles. After witnessing the brutal beating of a Black militant by two white police officers, Sweetback attacks the police officers and spends the rest of the film on the run from the police with intermittent episodes where he gets assistance and shelter from Black (and some white) characters. Van Peebles' film ends after Sweetback evades the authorities and escapes to Mexico with the infamous intertitle:

"BAADASSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES."

Throughout, Sweetback's allegiance to a Black community is signaled through the aid he receives from the diverse spectrum of community members he encounters (from sex workers to Black preachers).

The politics that inhabit *Sweetback* have been endlessly debated. Some critics and viewers interpret the film as a radical embodiment of Black Power with its focus upon Black self-determination and community support. In contrast, others see it as politically reactionary for its endorsement of a brutal sexism where women serve as sexual vehicles for Black cis-gendered, heterosexual men's political liberation. While the film's mise-en-scène and narrative contains Black Power redefinitions of Black male sexuality, as well as critiques of policing and police brutality, Amy Onigiri writes that the film

"virtually invented the 'superspade' narrative formula that almost all later Blaxploitation films would follow" (172).

Meanwhile, Ed Guerrero considers Van Peebles' film as bringing to the surface

"the subtle fissures and cracks of class tension, ideological conflict, and aesthetic arguments...simmering in the black social formation since the winding down of the civil rights movement" (87).

The critical reception of *Sweetback* since the 1970s only reinforces the desire for those of us who engage with the film to focus on the ideological conflict that



Van Peebles' shooting diary and soundtrack for *Sweetback*. Two of many ancillary products associated with Van Peebles' film.



Image from Solanas and Gettino's *La Hora de los hornos*, a film intended to provoke discussion.



Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's arguments from "Towards a Third Cinema" were echoed by Black Arts Movement media makers and intellectuals. [tell who is in photo]

Guerrero sees forever haunting Van Peebles's film (Onigiri; Wiggins, 29).

Given Van Peebles' own vacillations and hedges regarding his film's explicit connection to Black Power, it is unclear how close of a connection he wanted to draw between *Sweetback* and Black Power politics.[17] The story of the film's production embody the contradictions of Van Peebles, whose decision to turn away from Hollywood and attempt to better represent Black working-class women and men in film clash with the labor and financial practices he embraces for the sake cinematic independence.

The production of *Sweetback's* soundtrack, which was eventually released on Stax Records, displays his rather canny and problematic attempts to avoid employing union musicians or license trademarked film music. Peebles famously uses a prefame Earth, Wind & Fire for the soundtrack of the film, which he produces by showing the band rough cut clips of the film before Peebles is done with principle shooting of his film. Van Pebbles then releases *Sweetback's* soundtrack months before the national release of the film, where it cracks the Billboard Top 20 in 1971 and ushers in one of the most crucial components of Blaxploitation cinema's cultivation of a Black audience: the use of contemporary Soul and Funk for the purposes of marketing. And as Earth, Wind & Fire founder Maurice White reveals in his memoir, Peebles never pays the band for their work. Pre-releasing a soundtrack is just one strategy used in New Hollywood to drum up promotion but also help finance production.

Van Peebles engages in other, hyper-capitalist strategies: setting up a limited liability corporation; using offshore banks to channel funds; and, perhaps his most infamous strategy, Van Peebles tells local unions that he is filming a pornographic film (an industry that does not require union labor) so he can retain full autonomy over whom he hires rather than using union labor and paying higher wages (Wiggins, 31). Producing and distributing *Sweetback* under the guise of a pornographic film then leads to the most powerful marketing tool Van Peebles can wield, that *Sweetback* is rated "X" by an "all-white jury." [18]

This context is crucial because it indicates the caution with which one should approach Van Peebles' strategic engagement with the discourses already present in Black radical thought, media critique, and revolutionary filmmaking. In May of 1971, two months after *Sweetback* premieres in Detroit, embroiled in censorship debates because of the racialized "X" rating and on the cusp of broader national distribution and media attention, Van Peebles gives an interview to the Associated Press where he describes *Sweetback* as a film derived from "the Black aesthetic," a direct reference to Fuller's concept. Van Peebles states,

"The film was made from the black aesthetic. It doesn't come soft and I don't act as an ambassador of goodwill. The film doesn't make concessions to the audience, so the audience has to come to it" (Sterling, 28).[19]

Rather than explicate what he means by a "black aesthetic," Van Peebles suggests to the interviewer that whatever the "black aesthetic" means it requires producing films that do not cater to an "American white audience." In fact, Van Peebles





[top] Van Peebles on the set of *Watermelon Man* (1970), his first and last major Hollywood film.



One of the final shots of *Watermelon Man* (1970), a portent of the revolution that Van Pebbles would envision in *Sweetback*.

claims that *Sweetback* ignores white audiences completely, a claim only bolstered by his fight against Jack Valenti and the MPAA. Furthermore, he dismisses the critical furor as well as the censorship and distribution battles regarding *Sweetback* as a consequence of his decision to evade white Hollywood entirely, an oft-repeated claim throughout his promotion of the film (Sterling 28). In interviews, Van Peebles also makes explicit and implicit references to the intersection of race, class ,and audience in determining the negative reception of *Sweetback*, suggesting, fo instance, that *Sweetback* is a film made for "street people"[20] or, in an interview with *The New York Times*, purposefully highlighting the bourgeois nature of Black middle- and intellectual-class pretentions by declaring that "the Black media was very insulted that I didn't choose a more respectable segment of the black condition" (Gussow 19). The inference here is that Van Peebles' audience represents an "authentic" Black working-class constituency.

Van Peebles' mix of shrewd political agitprop and marketing genius comes out in these promotional interviews where he addresses his "audience," which he asserts is neither White nor Black and bourgeois. However, it is in his aforementioned shooting diary for the film where he engages, albeit briefly, with the political economy of audience formation, the discourse of revolutionary filmmaking, and the relation between film and other mass media forms.[21] Within the "Ideas" section of the book, Van Peebles' draws from a combination of Black Aesthetic and "Third Cinema" concepts when he describes his desire to make a film that

"reconquer(s) our own minds" such that cinema can serve as a vehicle for reversing this process of "colonization" (Van Peebles 66).[22]

Cinema is especially important for Van Peebles because it can be shielded from what he calls the "racist economic pressures" that plague television and other advertising-sponsored modalities of mass media. [23]

TV, writes Van Peebles,

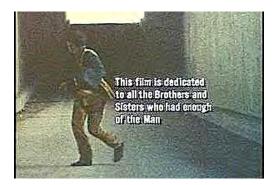
"was out; television at this stage in the game, as it is practiced in America at least, is not a feasible tool for carrying really relevant ideas to the minds of the disenfranchised. The umbilical cord from the TV program to its sponsor is short and very vital and can be cut abruptly, too abruptly for a program to get away for pushing an extra-uppity ideas" (66, emphasis mine).

This last sentence denotes the key distinction Van Pebbles draws between advertisement-driven commercial television and the political and aesthetic independence that "self-funded" cinema, which does not rely on corporate sponsors, can potentially grant to filmmakers. Van Peebles often discusses the lessons he learned from trying to wrestle control from Columbia Pictures while directing his first Hollywood-produced feature-length film *Watermelon Man* (1970). However,his shooting diary is the first time that Van Peebles' explicitly makes a materialist, medium-specific argument for cinema. In it, he acknowledges the distinction between two types of viewership. On the one hand, the potentially collectivist nature of cinematic spectatorship potentially engages with the audience (or perhaps *against* the formation of an audience commodity). On the other hand, there is always an implied commodification of watching found in advertising-sponsored mass media forms like television. [24]

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA





Sweetback's opening credits indicate the film's address to and from the Black community.



It is in the context of Van Peebles' articulations of the audience along racial and class lines, as well as his acknowledgement that a cinematic audience can potentially be an anti-audience or an audience freed from its commodification, that we must reckon with the complicated and seemingly antithetical nature of *Sweetback's* connection to the discourse of the Black Aesthetic as well as revolutionary cinema post-68. One the one hand, for Van Peebles, revolutionary cinema means a revolution. Van Peebles explicitly gestures towards the language of insurgency by describing his film production organized like "guerilla units" to evade the political economy of telecommunications.

In their manifesto for a Third Cinema, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino describe the "participant comrade" as taking part in a purposefully structured viewing experience ("a free space") that turns audiences into participants in communal discursive experience about the ideas within revolutionary cinema. The key for Solanas and Getino is deemphasizing the film object as a commodity ("subordinating its own form, structure and language, and propositions") and instead turning it into what they call a "film act" (Solanas and Getino 9). As Lars Lierow suggests, similar exhibition techniques were used for the screening of *The New Ark*, a semi-documentary portrait of the Black Arts cultural politics associated with Spirit House that doubled as a call to action and collective responsibility co-directed by Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka (9). *The New Ark* was exhibited in a "community context, at local festivals, libraries, churches and community centers," which reinforced the function of Black Arts cinema as both "artistic expression and propaganda instruments" (15). [25] [open endnotes in new window]

In this regard, skepticism about entertainment and mass cultural forms expressed by Black Aestheticians is just as strong as it is within discussions of revolutionary cinema, which are primarily associated by Solanas and Getino with the documentary form. Disarticulating revolutionary film from the cinema of spectacle means conceptualizing the masses differently. Revolutionary cinema takes the audiences/spectators out of the realm of commodity and reproducing the ideology of "US financial capital" and into an alternate space of social reproduction and action (Solanas and Getino 4). Between the Black Arts Movement and more recognizable Third Cinema film discour, we can thus identify the desire to transform the audience/spectator into an anti-audience. This will potentially happen through a series of intentional exhibition and distribution practices that de-commodify watching-labor and disconnect it from reproducing the ideology of finance capital into revolutionary, anti-capitalist forms of social reproduction.

On the other hand, however, Van Peebles also embraces auteurism as well as Hollywood's full-spectrum approach of multimedia synergy and saturation for marketing <code>Sweetback</code> through the production of ancillary, spin off products like books and soundtracks.[26]Indeed, Van Peebles' conceptualization of the "masses" who watch <code>Sweetback</code>—which for him is a racialized proletariat (Black, anti-bourgeois "street people")—sits just as easily alongside capitalist conceptualizations of a conventional audience, who consume commodities and produce the commodity of "watching." What his shooting diary makes clear is Van Peebles does not see any contradictions between this audience and the idea of an anti-audience. In fact, he finds no other way to make revolutionary film to reach the masses within the United States except to embrace this contradiction. As he





Third Cinema's *La Hora del los Hornos* eschews popular form and considers the audience to be forged from discussions after the film screening.

THE EMANCIPATION ORGASM:
SWFFTBACK IN

PIERE is a certain griss white homor in the fact that the black marches and demonstraons of the '90's reached artistic fulfilment in the '70's with Flip Wilson's Geraldine and Melin Van Perbles' Sweldack, two provocative and ultimately insidious reforenzations of all the Supphires and Studie of yesteryear. Who would have believed that it would

Who would have believed that the Afron and dashists would heat to Geraldine?
Who would have believed that the Black is Resulful theirine would lead to the Sweet-back Doctrine that Black is Marcy?
There is, at 1 say, humon-black and white-in this, and in the Inther fact that many Negroe, even worse Negroes who are very black, day Geraldine and Sweetback and insist at they are the distilled essence of the black are whether.
As Geraldine and, "What you see is what you.

rest six a preparation reveal to image could only happen in a community without a sure wree of the meaning of its experience, and the two behaling power of extensite and fine the control of the control of the control of the artistic intentions.

Nothing thouse this more clearly than the fact that black needs do not give serious at tecking to television and movies, two of the most proverful media developed by man. Not a single black needs so to single black meagazies, not a single black rando strating gives reviews and surface of the control of th

a single black radio station has a resident fit or mozie entite wases, black not mozie entite wases, black the state of th

Such u dialogue is necessary because of widespread symbolic confusion in the bit commonity. This confusion grows cut of passionate upheavels of the filest Revolushich destroyed all macrings and justice which destroyed all macrings and justice precipitately out to see, And now, in the w of that great event, we find ouncleves drift in deep and unchanted water, a long



is the safe and sterile harbors of the nast — the Black St

and wides away from the distant shores of decision, seed worth few a spill of the pick. Let us decision the seed of the spill of the seed of the see ligi Tigress, the Happy Dady, and the bad Sixger. In the whole workhow, Bade Repople over very, whirst, emission, children of the coll and of nature. They were a disable, genle of and of nature. They were a disable, and the collection of pages and the collection of the collection of the three collections of a white facility reconsists the white mass nieger as represented by the collection of the collection of the collection of the three collections of the collection of the collection of the three collections of the collection of the collection of the white pages of the collection of the collection of the collection of the three collections.

Lerone Bennett Jr. published, "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," his essay on *Sweetback* in September of 1971, thrusting *Ebony* into a conversation about the definition of Blackness and revolutionary cinema. Click on image to see large.

writes.

"The Man has an Achilles pocket and he might go along with you if at least there is some bread in it for him. But he ain't about to go carrying no messages for you, especially a relevant one, for free" (68).

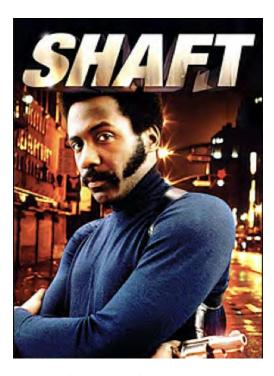
Unlike the film theoreticians of the Black Arts Movement or Third Cinema, Van Peebles thinks a "revolutionary mood" is possible within the paradigms of first cinema via the genre-driven spectacles of entertainment, something we can see in his first Hollywood-produced film, *Watermelon Man.*[27] The point here is less to establish a revolutionary litmus test for Van Peebles, even though, at least amongst Black Arts associated artists and intelligentsia, this is precisely what happens in the wake of *Sweetback's* release. Instead, I see Van Peebles' invocation of the Black Aesthetic and the reaction to his film as evidence of a growing theoretical self-awareness amongst Black Power-aligned culture workers as they contend with the commodification of spaces they have carved out for the purposes of revolutionary social reproduction. In other words, can the audience-commodity become a space for cultural nationalist, proto-Marxist, or other forms of fugitivity?

There has been a vast array of responses to Sweetback across Black media outlets, from reviews in Black newspapers to a 1971 episode of Tony Brown's Black Journal dedicated to the film. However, the dueling reviews of Lerone Bennett and Huey P. Newton in 1971 best embody the central questions raised by Sweetback, which is whether a fugitive, anti-audience can be created, via a Black Aesthetic, within commercial cinematic forms. Their respective focus on the relation between representation and ideology, and whether revolution can be embodied and recognized in aesthetic forms, has understandably influenced the way we still talk about Sweetback. Bennett's review appears in the Johnson Publishing Company's *Ebony* magazine three months after Newton's essay appears in the Black Panther Intercommunal Service newsletter. [28] Bennett, a social historian and Ebony's associate editor, concludes that Van Peebles' approach to Black audiences attempts to simultaneously "entertain and instruct" by mirroring mass media commodities like "CBS, NBC and James Bond." [29] This leads to Bennett's observation that "the real work of art creates an audience instead of seeking one" (118, emphasis mine). Bennett's suggestion that Sweetback does not create its audience but rather "delivers it" betrays a fundamental anxiety over the development of an audience commodity through mass media networks (his allusions to CBS and NBC) and franchising ("James Bond"). The battle against the forces of audience commodification is fundamentally tied to the space of leisure time, where attention is the key component of exchange value and where developing a mode of attention that does not co-opt the consciousness of Black women and men is at stake (Bennett 114).

Whereas Bennett sees no hope except for independent and Black non-commercial art, Huey P. Newton's "revolutionary analysis" of *Sweetback* in his review, "He Won't Bleed Me," suggests this is not the case. In his review, Newton places a heavy emphasis on a cinematic version of Black "signifying" that he argues Van Peebles engages in throughout his film.[30] Newton suggests that through these signifying practices *Sweetback* does in fact create its own anti-audience against the desires of the "corporate capitalist...who either ignore(s) or fail(s) to recognize the many [revolutionary] ideas in the film" (3). And just as the character



The June 19, 1971, issue of *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service Newsletter* was dedicated to Huey P. Newton's analysis of Van Peebles' *Sweetback*. Click on image to see large. Click here to get PDF of entire review.



Films like *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972) and *Coffy* (1973), were released in the aftermath of *Sweetback to* capitalize on the Black audience Van Peebles' film created.

Sweetback uses "their technology [...] but in a positive way...to deliver him from the jaws of the monsters who are using the most advanced technology to try and capture him," Newton suggests that commercial communications and the very technological and material processes that create the audience commodity can be seized to form a new, liberated intercommunal aggregate. [31]

Even after Newton and the Black Panther Party move away from Black Cultural Nationalism, one can see its legacies in Newton's thought after 1970, especially in his request that readers of "He Won't Bleed Me" engage in conspicuous consumption and buy the soundtrack and book versions of Sweetback, going as far as to list the price and address for where readers can send their checks. Newton's off-hand statements about consumption are fascinating given what one would assume to be the alignment between Black Panther intercommunalism and Third Cinema's theorizations of a "participant comrade." And ironically, it appears as if it is to Bennett, publishing in *Ebony* magazine, that we find a doctrinaire expression of the Black Aesthetic and anti-audience sentiment. Yet, Newton's embrace of consumption is premised on what he sees as Van Peebles' seizure of the means of technological and mass media production via Sweetback. And this seizure is a key component in the Panthers' shift to intercommunalism. [32] In this regard, there is some resonance with Third Cinema's approach to the problem of film finance and production, which Solanas and Getino see as achieved through the "expropriations of the bourgeoisie" (9). The difference, in Newton's account of *Sweetback*, is the subversive and perhaps clandestine nature of the way Van Peebles expropriated these finances.[33]

The films that immediately follow *Sweetback* then cause consternation rather than rigorous analysis. Gordon Parks' *Shaft* (1971) and Gordon Parks Jr's *Super Fly* (1972) replicate the formula of *Sweetback*'s success while sublimating its explicit engagement with Black Power communal ideas into what Kara Keeling calls a codified

"individualistic, macho, black action hero fight[ing] against injustice (and/or the 'the white man') in an urban milieu outside of the legal mechanisms ostensibly in place to fight injustice" (102).

While the genre peters out because of intense criticism and eventually turns into parody by the end of the 1970s, these films leave a complex legacy into the late 1970s and in future articulations of Black cinema. They reveal a market of young, urban Black women and men whose Black Nationalist sentiments are ripe for commodification in the wake of 1968. In particular, cinematic modes of identification are a critical instrument for this exploitation precisely because they offer something that is missing from Hollywood commercial cinema—images of Blackness, and particularly Black masculinity, that allow black audiences to "collectively reconstitute subjectivity" (Ongiri ,185). However, as Keeling points out, we should take caution in even summoning the genre of Blaxploitation itself. This is because film theories that posit the existence of Blaxploitation also do the work of exploitation as well by calling

"into being...a population that might be isolated in excess of the audience Hollywood assumes exists for its mainstream features" (103).

What Keeling's warning points towards is a confusion between a Black aggregate summoned vis-à-vis the commodity and "real" political formations in the world.

Streaming services have made us all revolutionaries



The murder of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd only intensified our age of algorithmic audience segmentation and the contentification of social justice concerns. Streaming services like Netflix and HBO Max began to market "social justice" content after the racial uprisings in the summer of 2020.

By arguing for an alternative genealogy of the idea of a "Black Aesthetic," I am asking media scholars to approach this idea as not simply about the politics of representation. As I have shown, there are also materialist concerns regarding the audience commodity and its formation post-68. I also want to connect the powerful critiques of media that exist within Black Radical thought in the late 1960s to Smythe's and other emergent post-Marxist ideas regarding the evolution of the commodity form and its relation to aesthetic and political economy in the 1970s. I would not go as far as to say that Black Radical thinkers theorized the audience commodity first. Rather, I see the debates regarding Black Nationalism, the Black Aesthetic, and its relationship to the rapidly expanding market for Black art and media as creating a crucial context for sophisticated engagements with mass media and the revolutionary potential of leisure-time. While I do not want to trivialize this theoretical moment of "liberation" by aligning it with words like "leisure time," what Black Power-aligned intellectuals and media-makers have realized is that the space and capacity for the attention of Black people is in the balance. It's about the possibility to have Black people work against the audience commodity and for mass political mobilization. In this regard, Black Nationalism has been a powerfully disruptive and destabilizing political, economic and aesthetic force, especially as it crystalizes the idea of a "Black Aesthetic"—this despite the commodification of movement politics that one could say has happened alongside its emergence.[34]

We live in a moment when the geopolitics and protests that have revitalized Black radical intellectual traditions are reminding us that there are alternatives and that possibilities of counter-hegemony still exist. The twin crises of continued anti-Black state-sanctioned violence and the COVID-19 pandemic have foregrounded the centrality of Black life and Black social death to both the functioning and dismantling of U.S. neoliberalist regimes. Spurred by the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd Jr. we have seen the rapid mainstreaming of the phrase "Black Lives Matter," a stunning turn of events given what, to me, was the failure during an analogous moment of political reckoning during the tail-end of Barack Obama's presidency in 2012-15. It is also important to remark that the revival of Dallas Smythe's work occurred in the period between Occupy and the first wave of racial uprisings in the way of Trayvon Martin's death.[35]



The Occupy Movement along with the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement two years later spurred the emergence of left progressive participatory media practices. However, subsequent adoption of activist discourses by the titans of platform capitalism between 2012 and now have been utilized to aggregate content.



Activism and grappling with state violence.

Just as activists and academic scholarship has begun to grapple with anti-Black state violence, the political economic and social consequences of digital labor, surveillance and platform capitalism, Smythe's theorizations of the audience commodity has become even more "suited for describing the exploitation of user activities by corporate platforms on the contemporary Internet" (Fuchs, 545). Media studies scholarship has indeed set out to theorize the intersection of social media platforms and progressive activism.[36]

Missing from Smythe's revival was an engagement with connection between his ideas and racial capitalism as well as an assessment of the contemporaneity of his ideas. As I have argued above, Black radical thinkers and artists were also grappling with the rise of advanced technocapitalist commodity forms like the audience. And while Smythe's work never took hold within Black Studies let alone Black Media Studies, there is a range of recent scholarship like Brian Jefferson's Digitize and Punish: Racial Criminalization in the Digitial Age (2020), Armond R. Towns' On Black Media Philosophy (2022), Simone Brown's Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness (2015), Ruha Benjamin's Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code (2019) and others that seeks to grapple with the intersection of race, media and digital forms of platform capitalism and surveillance.

In addition, what should we make of the swift adoption activist discourses by the titans of platform capitalism: Netflix, Google, Twitter and Spotify? Of the many differences between 2014 and now, what feels most salient is the rapidity to which, in the wake of global racial uprisings, many platforms—even those that provide safe harbor to white ethno-nationalist pages, followers, and accounts—have rushed to coopted progressive activist discourses for the purposes of categorizing platform content.



Activism often leads to new categories of aggregating for the sake of marketing.

In fact, one would be remiss to note the rapidity by which scholars and activists associated with Black Lives Matter or the promulgation of anti-racism trainings—a hallmark of corporate capitalist self-care and university administration—have also inked content deals with media companies.[37]

We need to thoroughly interrogate this moment, one in which activism has been transformed into content for our platforms, and "anti-racism" has become a new way to tune the algorithms that create and aggregate entertainment on our streaming services. A pressing question is this: Our contemporary moment is one in which we are witnessing the platform content-ification of Blackness as well as the parallel reorganization of mass mobilization and alternative forms of aggregate belonging through algorithmic culture. How does a radical Black, anticapitalist politics work with this unique political challenge? This question also extends to those of us in the academy whose scholarly ideas are met by a media industry already adept at hyper-reflexive, para-industrial forms that exploit intellectual capital and rapidly aggregate audiences. It is fair to say that media already functions as what John Caldwell calls a "shadow academy," which mirrors "the very theoretical (and political) modes of engagement" that we have developed and returns them back to us in anti-democratic, techno-capitalist aggregates that are the opposite of what one would ideally call a public, let alone a counter-public (Caldwell, 721-722).

In other words, the easy way in which activist language has come to organize media content suggests that the ontological and political difference between an audience, public, and counter-public has blurred. The audience, a thoroughly commodified aggregate, readily stands in for progressive forms of racial (and political) solidarity rather than an object that we identify as managing democratic energies. If Black radical engagement with the problem of the "audience" provides a heuristic for our present, it is in the form of reassurance that there is a precursor to our contemporary moment. As Black radical thinkers directly confronted the problem of the commodification of political subjectivity at the dawn of neoliberalism, their legacy of struggle, success, and failure can orientate us in the present.

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Alice Walker, a very talented young woman out of rural Georgia, has been fantastically busy in the past few years but has now settled down (in Mississippi) for serious work. Like Samuel Allen, she finds both John A. Williams and Mari Evans among the "promising" and "important" writers, and she thinks The Man Who Cried I Am is probably the most important novel by a black writer since Invisible Man. As to whether black writers should direct their work toward black audiences, Miss Walker replies:

Black writers should direct their work towards an audience, some imaginary ideal audience that will appreciate what they have to say,

novelist as the most important black American writer of all time.

There was no attempt by NEGRO DIGEST to poll only those writers who have published books or to exclude those whose ideas are different from the editors'. And so, the writers represented here cover the whole range of creativity, from those authors highly esteemed by the Literary Establishment to those who are known only to a small coterie of local readers. Some of the writers are grandparents, and others are barely in their twenties. Unsurprisingly, then, there are contrasting and conflicting viewpoints, and the distance between the educational qualifications of the respondents is sometimes very great indeed. Generally, the older writers

and profit from it. To write solely for a black audience is limiting and presumes too much: that they will appreciate your efforts; that they will try to understand you; that they will care enough about your work to buy your books; and that white people could never get anything (be made better, one might say) from what one writes. My own family has squashed my illusions that black audiences are more perceptive or moved more than white ones. The only time they will read my material is when I send it to them.

I think it is only important that we write from within ourselves and that we direct our efforts outward. Period. I would have liked for Victor Hugo to like my stories quite as much as I admire his.



NEGRO DIGEST January 1968

THE BITTERSWEET OF SWEETBACK/ OR, SHAKE YO MONEY MAKER

BY DON L. LEE

"If you fathered the image of your concept of the universe, you already got them fighting on your territory."

-Melvin Van Peebles

EW PEOPLE understand as well as the filmmaker the use and manipulation of the image. After all, his

job is that of image maker. The images that you create reflect you, reflect your total world, i.e., define where you are at a particular time in space, and are some of the best measurements for your state of consciousness at a given time. Walt Disney made films about animals; he created mickey mouse and don-

ald duck in the image of the European-man. Alfred Hitchcock dealt with the images of mystery and suspense and found acute joy in sticking sharp objects into people, while Bergman, Fellini and Godard competed for the "real" European sensibility and, naturally, left the impact of their own personalities and views on their films. All this took place as John Ford perfected the systematic extermination of the red man with the aid of John Wayne and the State Department. Films, as are other creations, are reflections of their creators.

Comment on the Real

There is no need at this time to restate the theme of Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song. By this time you've probably seen it, read

JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. I owe an incredible debt to Jerry Gonzalez, Matt Tierney, Mike Litwack, Maya Cade as well as the editors at *Jump Cut* for their incisive commentary and assistance on my essay. [return to page 1]
- 2. It is important to note that Smythe's description of the "consciousness industry" and insistence on the importance of the "audience commodity" is a critique of previous Western Marxist positions, especially those generated within the Frankfurt school, on culture and the culture industry. For Adorno, Horkheimer and others, the culture industry's primary product is standardized entertainment whose message and mode of production reflects the dominant ideologies of late stage capital, which Adorno states are nakedly governed "by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation" (99). For Smythe, this tendency to focus on "entertainment" as the valued good is an idealist one, which does not quite capture the critical terrain from which hegemony and possible counter-hegemony can take place nor provides an accurate picture of media's location within the base rather than as simply superstructure. The principle question motivating Smythe in "Blindspot," which for him is the properly materialist question is: "what is the commodity form of mass-produced, advertising-supported communications?" (2). For Smythe, it is the attention provided by audiences.
- 3. For more on this history, see Sylvia Harvey, May 1968 and After.
- 4. Here, I follow Howard Ramsby's argument in *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry* and Jonathan Fenderson in *Building the Black Arts Movement: Hoyt Fuller and the Cultural Politic of the 1960s.*
- 5. Johnson H. Johnson, Negro Digest, June 1961, 3.
- 6. See Nishikawa's "Between the World and Nommo: Hoyt W. Fuller and Chicago's Black Arts Magazines."
- 7. See Albert Kreiling's "The Commercialization of the Black Press and the Rise of the Race News in Chicago" and Hall's "On Sale at Your Favorite Newsstand: *Negro Digest/Black World* and the 1960s." I will elaborate more on the commercialization of Black Radicalism in the concluding section of this essay.
- 8. On the range of scholarly efforts, both past and present, that have documented this historical moment see: John McMillian's *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (OUP, 2011), Cynthia Young's *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (2006), Danielle Aubert's *The Detroit Printing Co-op: The Politics of the Joy of Printing* (Inventory Press, 2019), Christopher Tinson's *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s*, Julie Alt, *Alternative Art New York* (1965-1985): A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective. James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Parker Tyler's *Underground Film: A Critical*

- History and Alan W. Moore's Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City to name a few.
- 9. See Christopher Tinson's *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s (2017).*
- 10. In the survey, Fuller asked writers if they: "...see any future at all for the school of writers which seeks to establish a 'black aesthetic?' (Negro Digest, 48) [return to page 2]
- 11. Fuller surveyed and printed the responses from the following writers: Saunders Redding, Alice Walker, Carolyn Rodgers, Charles Wright, Julian Mayfield, Conrad Kent Rivers, K.W. Kgositsile, Margaret Danner, Jean Wheeler Smith, John Edgar Wideman, Mari Evans, Margaret Walker, S.E. Anderson, Julia Fields, Woodie King Jr., Ernest Gaines, Robert Boles, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Branch, John O. Killens, Addison Gayle Jr., Robert Hayden, Cyrus J. Colter, Laurence (Larry) P. Neal, Alice Childress, James A. Emanuel, Etheridge Knight, Sarah Webster Fabio, Kristin Hunter, Samuel Allen, Dudley Randall, Mignon K. Holland, Don L. Lee, Ronald Milner, John A. Williams, and Clifford Mason.
- 12. Here, I am invoking Jonathan Flatley's "How A Revolutionary Counter-Mood Is Made," which takes an affective approach to the way Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement labor organizers used their newsletters along with other organizing activities to eventually form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Fuller's work differs significantly from Flatley focus on the incredibly local nature of DRUM's organizers' engagement with physical location and proximity with workers.
- 13. Omitted.
- 14. This was the title of an article by Larry Neal that appeared in the journal *Arts in Society* in the fall of 1968.
- 15. The subtitle, "A Guerilla Filmmaking Manifesto" was added in subsequent editions.
- 16. See Cedric R. Robinson, Forgeries of Memory and Meaning.
- 17. On a number of occasions Van Peebles' resists providing any substantive ideological or political statement about Sweetback's meaning. Perhaps the most widely known of these evasions is his 1972 New York Times interview with Mel Gussow. When asked if he was a revolutionary Van Peebles states, "In this milieu, survival puts you immediately in confrontation with politics. I don't really talk about these things. Everything is in enemy territory." Even his first television interview about Sweetback, given the day his film premiered in Detroit, shows his careful approach to the political dimensions of his film. When asked by his interviewer if Sweetback is anti-white he responds that "the film is anti-injustice... there is a universality of the human experience that transcends frontiers of color if the people can get behind it." On Black Journal, when Tony Brown asks if Sweetback is revolutionary he does not answer the question but instead expresses his dismay about Black criticism and wonders aloud why Black critics question Sweetback and not white films. In fact, his interview with Tony Brown ends (their interview takes place in an outdoor park) with Van Peebles discussing the uncertainty of what "the revolution" will look like, which leads Brown to press him more on critical responses to his film. As Brown is formulating his question three young women enter into the frame, in what was undoubtedly a staged appearance, and visibly distracts Van Pebbles. At this point, Van Peebles, who was sitting with Brown at the base of a tree during their interview, gets up and leaves with the young women; the implication being Van Peebles is blurring the lines between

Sweetback's on screen portrayal as a revolutionary sexual wunderkind and his real life.

- 18. *Sweetback* was distributed by Cinemation Industries, a soft-core porn distributor. See Justin Wyatt's "The Stigma of X: Adult Cinema and the Institution of the MPAA Ratings System" in *Controlling Hollywood*.
- 19. In "The Emancipation Orgasm," which I will discuss below, Lerone Bennett takes Van Peebles to task for invoking the black aesthetic, suggesting that part of what *Sweetback* reveals is the valueless nature of the concept for Van Pebble's. Bennett quotes Van Peebles' using the term twice but I was only able to track down one instance from an interview Van Peebles gave to AP. It is noteworthy that Van Peeble's does not use the term with the black press, in his many television appearances, nor in his book, *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: A Guerilla Filmaking Manifesto* (1971). With that said, it is clear from how Van Peeble's talks about "black art" that he is drawing from BAM discourses regarding the black aesthetic even if he does not consistently invoke them directly.
- 20. Here, I am quoting from an interview with Van Pebbles titled "Melvin and the Street People" that appears in *The Atlanta Constitution* in 1971.
- 21. Van Pebbles' claims aside, he was not alone in thinking about the relationship between revolutionary politics and Black independent cinema. Not only was the L.A. Rebellion film school directors contemporaneous with Van Pebbles', who shot *Sweetback* in Los Angeles, but, as I mentioned in the beginning of this section, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and other Black Arts Movement associated artists were also exploring the connection between Third Cinema and independent Black cinema. While The L.A. Rebellion associated filmmakers were screening Third Cinema films on California campuses during the early 1970s at Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey, Black Arts Movement associated artists were producing similar screenings. For more, see *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, eds. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart (2015) and Whitney Straub's "Recovering The New-Ark: Amiri Baraka's Lost Chronicle of Black Power in Newark, 1968" (2014).
- 22. Here, I am referring to Michael Gillespie's excellent essay, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song: 'I'm Gonna Say a Black Ave Maria For You.'" Gillespie infers a direct relationship between Van Peeble's film and revolutionary concepts that the historical record suggests is much more muddled and ambiguous, especially when taking into account Van Peebles' own vacillations in the press and in his shooting diary, which makes very few references to existing Black aesthetic practices, which would have been readily accessible to him by 1971. In fact, the majority of his references in the book are to European and American literature as well as commercial and art cinema.
- 23. Van Peebles make an understandable, if erroneous assumption regarding the differences between the mediums of cinema and television that his own production practices contradict. It is true that cinema can allow for a collective experience unlike television viewing, which is often done in the home. However, such medium-specific engagements are breaking down during the 1970s. Also, in his quest for creative and "political" independence, Van Peebles pursued financing strategies that mimicked rather than undermined similar methods perfected within New Hollywood and exploitation cinema. This is not to suggest that the aesthetic of the film is somehow crudely determined by its mode of production. However, the film's production was for all intents and purposes more in-line with commercial film than not, with the exception of Van Peebles' use of non-union labor, which does raise useful questions about the role unions in the creative trades play in perpetuating long standing issues of institutional racism within the film industry. Regardless, such production methods were very much in

contradiction to the discourse of revolutionary filmmaking during the period. Simultaneously, with the emergence of public access television, public broadcasting and especially the rise of technologies like Sony's Portapack and other video playback technologies in the late 1960s marked the beginning of a shift away from the dominance of conventionally advertisement-driven television and the potential extension of television into a more collectivist medium. For the changing role of television and video during this period see Devorah Heitner's *Black Power TV* (2013), Chris Meigh-Andrews' *A History of Video Art: The Development of Form and Function* (2006), Leah Churner, "Out of the Vast Wasteland: The early years of public access cable television in New York City" (2009) and Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (1997).

- 24. Van Peebles makes a similar statement in clip of an interview that appears in Joe Angio's documentary *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)* (2005). The clip is not sourced in Angio's documentary but looks to be from a television interview from the 1970s. Van Peebles states that "if Cinema no longer becomes relevant to the struggle I won't make another film....the media does not dictate the message the need dictates the media."
- 25. Please see Matthew Holthmeier's "Entertainment-wise, a motherfucker: Critical Race Politics and the Transnational Movement of Melvin Van Peebles" for an excellent analysis of Van Peebles' relationship to Solanas and Getino's idea of "third cinema" and 1960s revolutionary film more broadly: http://www.ejumpcut.org/ archive/jc59.2019/HoltmeierVanPeebles/text.html [return to page 3]
- 26. In *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood*, Eithne Quinn argues that Van Peebles' radical praxis also became "the blueprint for a more individualist and macho entrepreneurial creative archetype" (126). Van Peebles auteurism and at times authoritarian approach to production management did not necessarily fit with the communal democratic nature of guerilla filmmaking that Solanas and Getino outline in "Towards a Third Cinema."
- 27. Racquel Gates sees Jeff Gerber's transformation in *Watermelon Man* from reluctant Black man into possible revolutionary as foreshadowing the revolutionary turn Sweetback makes in *Sweet Sweetback's Baaadaasss Song* in their essay "Subverting Hollywood From The Inside Out: Melvin Van Peebles Watermelon Man."
- 28. For more on Bennett's relationship to Johnson see James E. West's *Ebony Magazine and Lerone Bennett Jr.: Popular Black History in Postwar America* (2020).
- 29. Bennett's observation is quite prescient. In a 1972 interview with Mel Gussow, Van Peebles states that he in working on sequel to *Sweetback*, which, as we know, never came to fruition.
- 30. Where the canonical understanding of Black "signifying" practices in the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* is used to argue for the presence of an intentional, self-referential, aesthetic tradition within Black literature; the way Newton's uses it suggests both an aesthetic and ideological subversion of cinematic language and meaning whose referent leads back to the cultural practices of the Black proletariat for the purposes of turning leisure time into a space of revolutionary social reproduction. While Newton does not cite Van Peebles book I do think his argument about the film come from *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, where Van Peebles makes a similar argument about his approach to *Sweetback's* concept.

- 31. It is important to note here that while I do think it is useful to reframe our engagement with Newton's "He Won't Bleed Me" to focus on the materialist approach to mass media, the audience commodity and the possibility of revolutionary aesthetics it is hard not to acknowledge the lens he filters all of it through, which is to romanticize the brutal nature of sex work and the objectification of black women for the sake of the struggle. In this regard it has made it easy to reject Newton's understanding of the revolutionary art commodity as gendered, sexualized and only open to manipulation by men.
- 32. Where Bennett sees no hope in the age of telecommunications except for independent and Black non-commercial art Huey P. Newton's "revolutionary analysis" of Sweetback suggests this is not the case. The important, if underappreciated, context to read "He Won't Bleed Me" is Newton's introduction of the theory of "intercommunalism" in the Fall of 1970 at Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. The version of Newton's speech I refer to here is the November 18, 1970 speech at Boston College where Newton rearticulates the Black Panther Party's move away from both cultural nationalism and internationalism. It is the grounds of the Party's ideological change that are worth highlighting. For Newton, "community" is not in and of itself a revolutionary formation but a "comprehensive collection of institutions that serve the people who live there" (Newton, 33). The now "communal" transformation of the nation-state is a consequence of reactionary forces that have accelerated growth of late-stage capital, the relationship between multinational corporations and the functions of empire and, for the purposes of this essay, most importantly "the development of technology...the mass media" along with "the fire power of the imperialist" that have ushered in the emergence of "the non-state" (Newton, 32-33). Revolutionary intercommunalism then is the socialist and Black radical response to liquidation of the state and the managerial role that capital, technocrats and the military have in the present. If, as Newton theorizes, revolutionary intercommunalism will end with the seizure of "the means of production," the redistribution of "wealth and the technology" he also suggests that Black revolutionary thought must "acknowledge how the world is hooked up" through mass media (Newton, 34-35).
- 33. See Benjamin Wiggins' "You Talkin' Revolution, Sweetback": On Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song and Revolutionary Filmmaking." He details, as does Van Peebles himself, the creative ways Van Peebles financed *Sweetback*.
- 34. This is not only the point Keeling and Onigiri make in their respective books but a sense of reassessment of mourning for the commodification of Black movement culture can be read across African-American, Black and Africana Studies from the 1980s into the present Some of that reassessment can be reading into John C. Hall and Albert Kreling's work, quoted above, about the demise of Black independent publishing but also in works ranging from Robert Weems' "The Revolution Will Be Marketed: American Corporations and Black Consumers During the 1960s" (1994) to more recent scholarship like Jonathan Fenderson's lament about the representational turn in Black Studies scholarship, which, as he writes in "Black Studies Post-Janus" (2018) has jettisoned the focus on political economy that defined the Black Radical scholarship of the 1960s and 70s.
- 35. Smythe's scholarly renaissance was primarily driven by Marxist academics interested in theorizing the hyper-extractive as well as gendered elements of digital labor and platform capitalism. Here I am thinking of the already cited work of Christian Fuchs but also Fuchs and Vincent Mosco's *Marx is Back—The Importance of Marxist Theory and Research for Critical Communication Studies Today* (2012), Elieen Meehan and Ellen Riordan's *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media* (2002), Trebor Scholz's "Facebook as Playground and Factory" in *Facebook and Philosophy* (2011), Brett Caraway's "Audience"

Labor in the New Media Environment: A Marxian Revisiting of the Audience Commodity" (2011) and Lee McGuigan and Vincent Manzerolle's *The Audience Commodity in a Digital Age: Revisiting a Critical Theory of Commercial Media (2014)* just to name a few. Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco and Manjunath Pendukar edited *Illuminating the Blindspots: Essays Honoring Dallas W. Smythe* (1993)the year after Smythe's passing. And of course, there was the "blindspot" debate, about what kind of role late-capital played in telecommunications, amongst Marxist theorists in the years following Smythe's essay. Here, one can read Graham Murdock's "Blindspots about Western Marxism: A Reply to Dallas Smythe" (1978), Bill Livant, "The Audience Commodity: On the 'Blindspot' Debate" (1979), and Livant and Jhally Sut's "Watching as Working: The Valorization of Audience Consciousness" (1986).

36. See, Sarah H. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, #Hashtag Activism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice (2020); Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, and Arely M. Zimmerman, By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism (2018); Angela Aguayo, Documentary Resistance: Social Change and Participatory Media (2019); and Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bendele, When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir (2017).

37. Here I am referring to the respective multiplatform development deals that Patrisse Cullors and Ibram X. Kendi signed in the wake of the 2020 racial justice uprisings. Patrisse Cullors signed a production deal with Warner Bros. Television Group, which lead, in part to the documentary *Eyes on the Prize: Hallowed Ground* (2021), which was streamed in HBO Max. Ibram X. Kendi similarly signed a deal with Boat Rocker Entertainment Company to launch a production company called Maroon Visions, to produce scripted and unscripted content for streaming services.

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THE EMANCIPATION ORGASM:

SWEETBACK IN

THERE is a certain grim white humor in the fact that the black marches and demonstrations of the '60s reached artistic fulfillment in the '70s with Flip Wilson's Geraldine and Melvin Van Peebles' Sweetback, two provocative and ultimately insidious reincarnations of all the Sapphires and Studs of yesteryear.

Who would have believed that it would come to this?

Who would have believed that the Afros and dashikis would lead to Geraldine?

Who would have believed that the Black is Beautiful rhetoric would lead to the Sweetback Doctrine that Black is Misery?

There is, as I say, humor—black and white—in this, and in the further fact that many Negroes, even some Negroes who are very black, dig Geraldine and Sweetback and insist that they are the distilled essence of the black aesthetic.

As Geraldine said, "What you see is what you get."

And what you deserve, really.

For such a preposterous reversal of images could only happen in a community without a sure sense of the meaning of its experience and the overwhelming power of electronic and film media to distort and debase even the best artistic intentions.

Nothing shows this more clearly than the fact that black media do not give serious attention to television and movies, two of the most powerful media developed by man. Not a single black newspaper, not a single black magazine, not a single black radio station gives serious and sustained coverage to television and movies. Not a single black magazine, not a single mass-circulation black magazine, not a single mass-circulation black magazine, not a single black radio station has a resident film or movie critic. To make matters worse, black intellectuals and writers—including the author—rarely descend from the Olympian heights of the theater and the novel to the grubby terrain of the popular arts.

This is, as you can see, an alarming situation, which lends itself to all kinds of manipulation and mischief. And what follows is neither a movie review nor an attempt to score points but a desperate plea for an open dialogue on the symbolic schizophrenia of our times.

Such a dialogue is necessary because of the widespread symbolic confusion in the black community. This confusion grows out of the passionate upheavels of the Black Revolution which destroyed all moorings and pushed us precipitately out to sea. And now, in the wake of that great event, we find ourselves drifting in deep and uncharted water, a long way



Confrequental enfrequence Melvin Van Pechler produced and directed new movie, Sweet Sweetbock's Bandaram Song, which has won both plandits and criticism. Van Pechler, who is a novelut, also directed Stony Of A Three-Day Pass, Watermelon Man.

from the safe and sterile harbors of the past and miles away from the distant shores of our destiny.

Let us tread water for a spell at this point, for an understanding of what we are doing and why we are doing it is necessary to prevent a collective disaster. The essence of our present maneuver is clear: We are trying to clear away the symbolic debris of the white man's attempt to control and define black reality. For more than 300 years now, white people have presumed to tell black people who they were and what they should want. In order to hide black people from themselves, white people created those enduring black stereotypes of

the Black Stud, the shrew-like Sapphire, the flip Tigress, the Happy Darky, and the bad Nigger. In the white worldview, black people were sexy, violent, emotional, children of the soil and of nature. They were a drinking dancing, wenching lot, a little thievish perhaps and communicate con artists but withal warm-hearted and full of fun, a waternelon in one hand, a razor in the other, and an ace of spades up the sleeves. It was this image which informed the Amos 'n' Andy Show, as author Larry King (Confessions of a White Rocist) has pointed out. "Who does not readily recognize the white man's nigger as represented by the [Auros 'n' Andy] cast?" he asked. "Lawyer

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BLACK PANTHER INTERCOMMUNAL NEWS SERVICE, JUNE 19, 1971

HE WON'T BLEED ME A REVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS OF SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG BY HUEY P. NEWTON. MINISTER OF DEFENSE, THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY. SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY BOBBY SEALE. CHAIRMAN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

am back on the scene with Brother of Defense, righteous, beautiful Bro-Huey P. Newton is one where I ther Huey P. Newton was there inremember the time when Brother terpreting all the symbolic meanings Huey was always there to interpret of the movie, and showing the essence the cultural things and symbolic forms of the real-life experience of the Black and expressions of the people in community as it is put together in different forms of art. This was over "Sweet Sweetback." three and a half years ago, the last

The feeling that I have now that I latest movie on the set, Our Minister

It seems that it has taken nothing time Brother Huey and I were together, more than the fact that Brother Huey Now that I am back on the scene I P. Newton is free, and now I find myhave had the chance to be with many self free from Jail Number Une and righteous Party members and com- out in the larger social prison, But munity people. Together we have we are with our people in the Black shared the experience of going to the community and Brother Huey P. Newton theatre to see "Sweet Sweetback" the is now giving forth a profound in-depth

analysis, a beautiful revolutionary people's analysis of "Sweet Sweetback." He is grasping for us the people all the symbolic meanings of the movie and explaining them to us.

When we have read the analysis given by Brother Huey we should unite as brothers and sisters in the struggle and go back and see "Sweet Sweetback" but not to be entertained, we should do it because we can be educated and our consciousness and understanding can be increased. I am going to see it again with Brother Huey's analysis as my guide, I hope you will too, Bobby Seale

The very popular movie produced and directed by Melvin Van Peebles called "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" contains many very important messages for the entire Black community. On many levels Van Peebles is attempting to communicate some crucial ideas, and motivate us to a deeper understanding and then action based upon that understanding, He has certainly made effective use of one of the most popular forms of communication -- the movie -- and he is dealing in revolutionary terms. The only reason this movie is available to us with its many messages is because Black people have given it their highest | support. The corporate capitalist would never let such an important message be given to the community if they were not so greedy. They are so anxious. to bleed us for more profits that they either ignore or fail to recognize the many ideas in the film, but because we have supported the movie with our attendance we are able to receive its message.

It is the first truly revolutionary Black film made and it is presented to us by a Black man, Many Black people who have seen the film have missed many of its significant points. I have seen the film several times and I have also talked to about 50 -60 others who have seen it and each time I understand more.

When Van Peebles first presented the film he refused to submit it to the Motion Picture Association to be rated because he knew they were not competent to judge its content. He



Minister of Defense, Huey P. Newton and Chairman Bobby Seale

Melvin Van Peebles had great difficulty oblaining the haids to make this movie, therefore it is a low-budget movie. In some parts the sound and the lighting are not as good as they might have been if he could have had greater freedom to make the film, I have found that its messages and significance are clearer when I combine viewing the film with listening to the record of the sound track and reading the book, I would urge all of you who want to understand the deep meanings of the movie completely to also buy the record and the book. (NOTE: The book is available in paperback for knew the film was not something which \$1.00, and the record for \$5.98, Both

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future.

may be obtained for \$6.00 by sending a check or money order to Lancer Books, 1560 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036)

"Sweet Sweetbach" blows my mind everytime I talk about it because it is so simple and yet so profound. It shows the robbery which takes place in the Black community and how we are the real victims. Then it shows how the victims must deal with their situation.

When the movie opens we see the faces of the women; there are young faces and old faces, light faces and dark faces, but in all of them there is a sign of weariness, sadness, but also joy. You soon recognize that the women are in a house of love, a house of prostitution, a house of ill-repute, and of course it is all of these things, depending on what position you are CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



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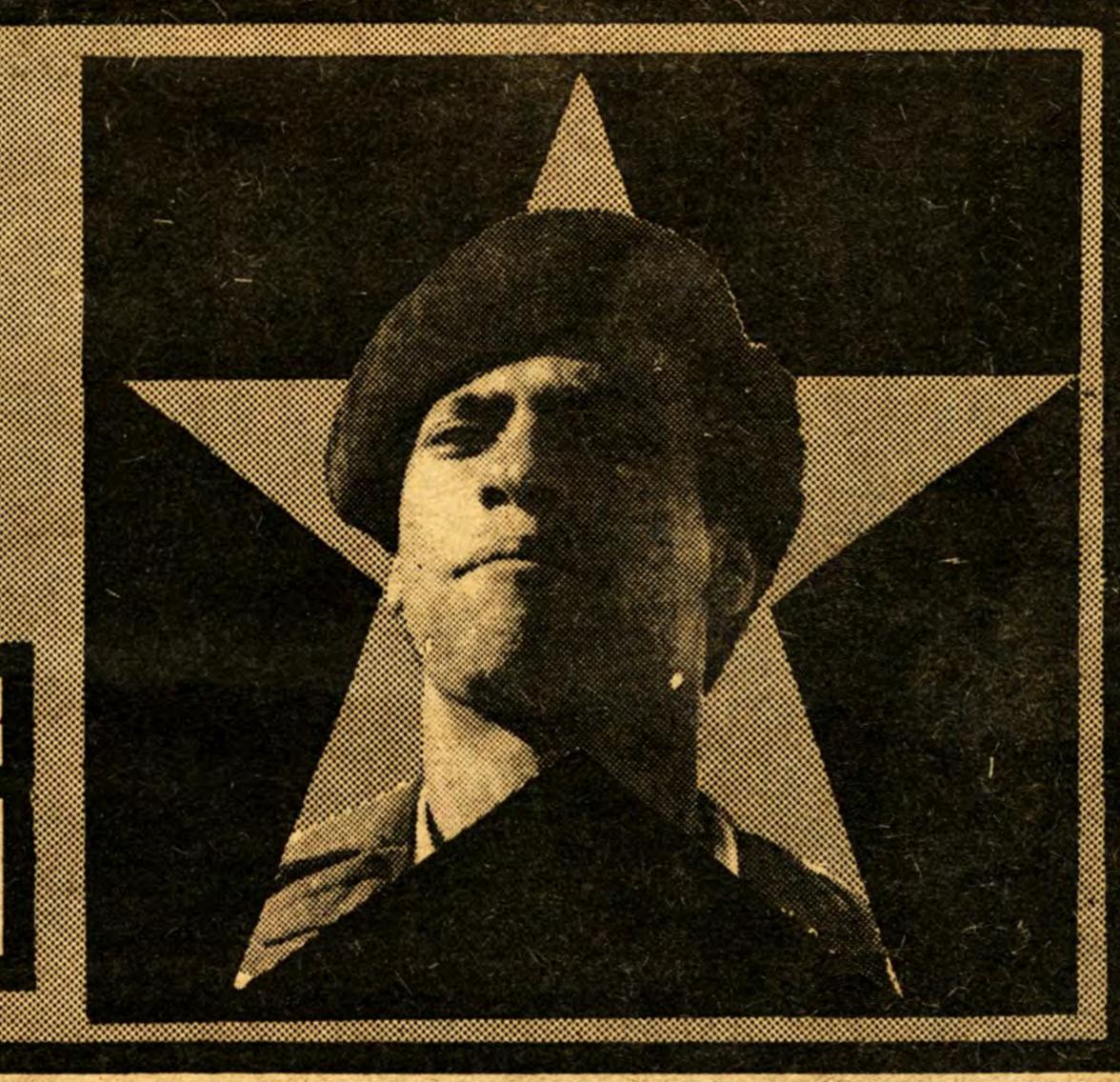
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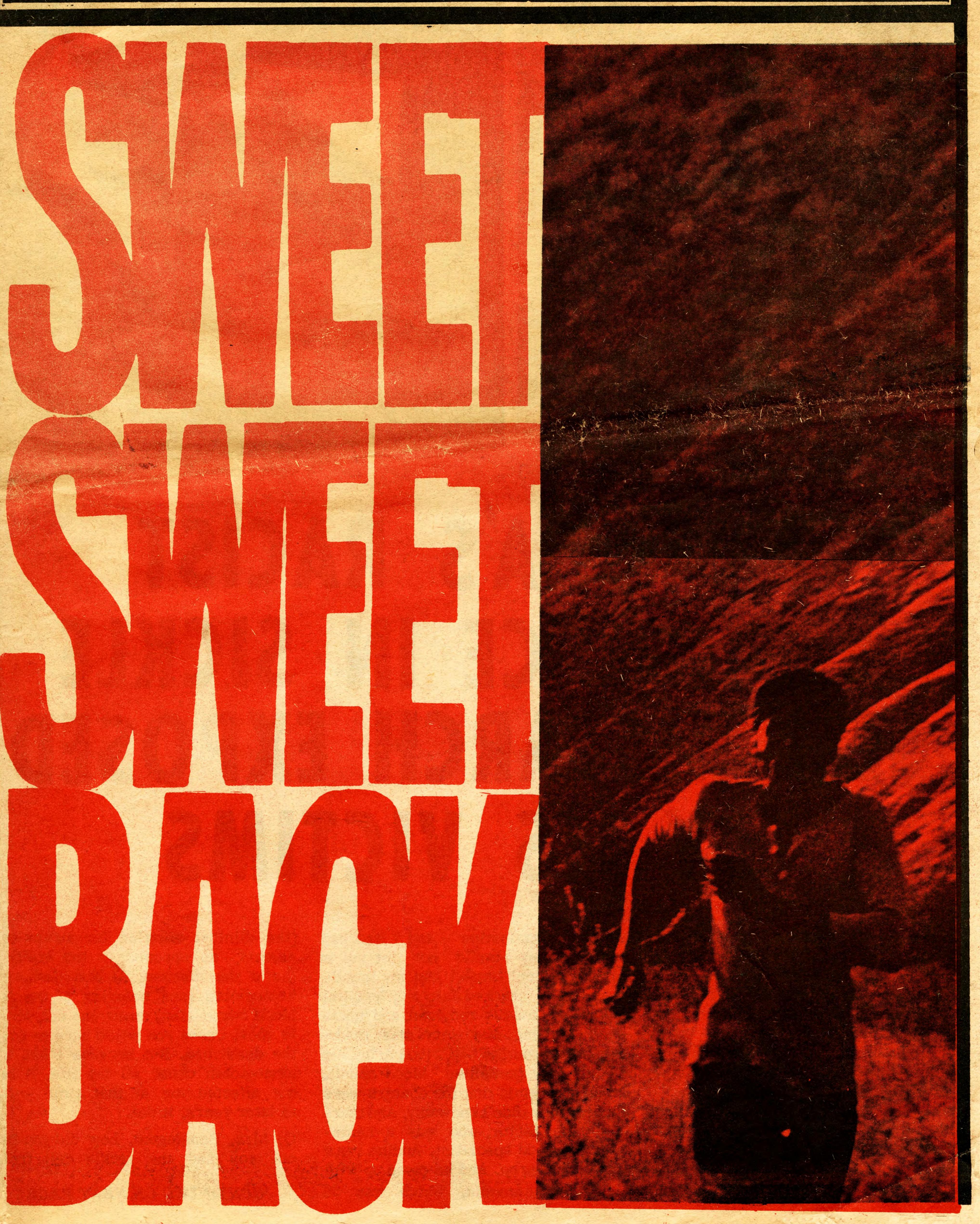
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SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 1971

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HE WON'T BLEED ME A REVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS OF SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG BY HUEY P. NEWTON, MINISTER OF DEFENSE, THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY, SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY BOBBY SEALE, CHAIRMAN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

different forms of art. This was over "Sweet Sweetback." three and a half years ago, the last It seems that it has taken nothing

have had the chance to be with many self free from Jail Number One and righteous Party members and com- out in the larger social prison. But munity people. Together we have we are with our people in the Black again with Brother Huey's analysis as shared the experience of going to the community and Brother Huey P. Newton my guide. I hope you will too. theatre to see "Sweet Sweetback" the is now giving forth a profound in-depth

The feeling that I have now that I latest movie on the set. Our Minister am back on the scene with Brother of Defense, righteous, beautiful Bro-Huey P. Newton is one where I ther Huey P. Newton was there inremember the time when Brother terpreting all the symbolic meanings Huey was always there to interpret of the movie, and showing the essence the cultural things and symbolic forms of the real-life experience of the Black and expressions of the people in community as it is put together in

time Brother Huey and I were together. more than the fact that Brother Huey but not to be entertained, we should Now that I am back on the scene I P. Newton is free, and now I find my-

analysis, a beautiful revolutionary people's analysis of "Sweet Sweetback." He is grasping for us the people all the symbolic meanings of the movie and explaining them to us.

When we have read the analysis given by Brother Huey we should unite as brothers and sisters in the struggle and go back and see "Sweet Sweetback" do it because we can be educated and our consciousness and understanding can be increased. I am going to see it

Bobby Seale

The very popular movie produced and directed by Melvin Van Peebles called "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" contains many very important messages for the entire Black community. On many levels Van Peebles is attempting to communicate some crucial ideas, and motivate us to a deeper understanding and then action based upon that understanding. He has certainly made effective use of one of the most popular forms of communication--the movie--and he is dealing in revolutionary terms. The only reason this movie is available to us with its many messages is because Black people have given it their highest support. The corporate capitalist would never let such an important message be given to the community if they were not so greedy. They are so anxious. to bleed us for more profits that they either ignore or fail to recognize the many ideas in the film, but because we have supported the movie with our attendance we are able to receive its message.

It is the first truly revolutionary Black film made and it is presented to us by a Black man. Many Black people who have seen the film have missed many of its significant points. I have seen the film several times and I have also talked to about 50 -60 others who have seen it and each time I understand more.,

When Van Peebles first presented the film he refused to submit it to the Motion Picture Association to be rated because he knew they were not knew they would understand it. Yet N.Y. 10036) the movie was given an "X" rating "Sweet Sweetback" blows my mind over his protests, thus making it im- everytime I talk about it because it is possible for the youth to see. But it so simple and yet so profound. It shows has a real message for them, for just the robbery which takes place in the future.



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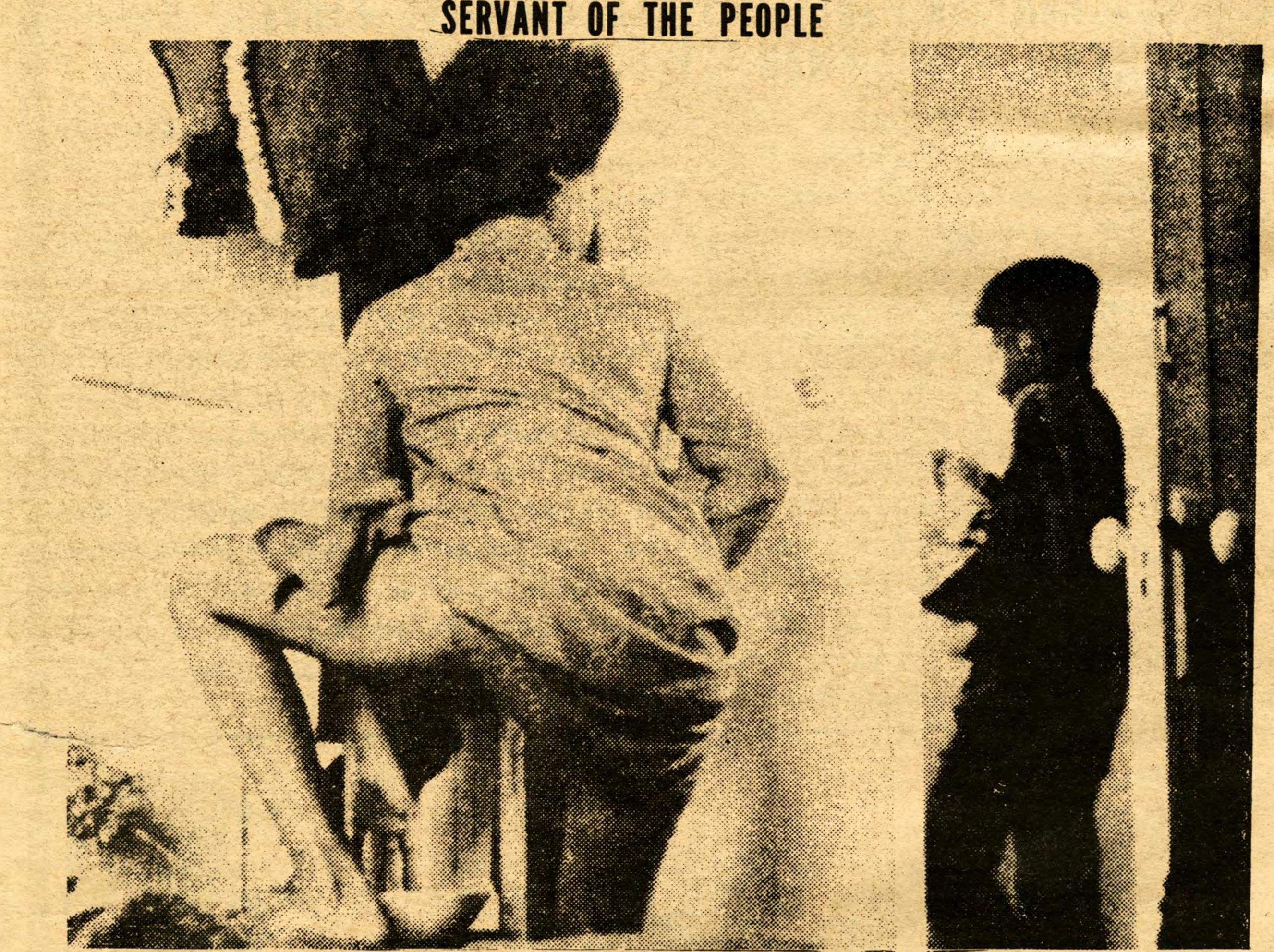
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A REVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS OF SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG BY HUEY P. NEWTON, MINISTER OF DEFENSE, THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY,



Young boy about to be baptized into manhood

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

viewing it from. This is the essence of the whole film, the victim and the oppressor looking at things in a much different way, from a different point of view.

The women are tired, yet they are happy. This is because they are feeding a small boy. As you look at the women you see that they are strong and beautiful Black women, definitely African in ancestry and symbolic of Mother Africa. The size of some of their breasts signifies how Africa is potentially the breadbasket of the world. The women are feeding stew to a small boy who is apparently very hungry, and as he downs it they keep offering him more. These women with their large breasts potentially could feed and nourish the world, and if this is so, certainly they have the potential to raise their liberator, for that is what the small boy is, the future of the women, of Black people, liberation.

They are in a house of prostitution not of their own will, but because of the conditions the oppressor makes for us. They are there to survive, and they sell their love to do so, therefore our love is distorted and corrupted with the sale. When you have nothing else left you give up your body, just as when you are starving you might eat your fingers; but it's the conditions which cause this, not the desire to taste your own blood; you have to survive.

The women standing around the small boy are not saying anything but by continuing to nourish him they are telling him that they can give him more than enough, not only food, but much love. This love is not for sale, so therefore it is uncorrupted, it is pure love, sacred and holy. Even though the boy is weak and has many sores in his face, with the love and nourishment

of the women he can become a very strong man. The sores in his face come from malnutrition and poor health, and Van Peebles is signifying the fine line between survival and death. Even though the women can feed him and clear up his malnutrition, they cannot do it freely and totally, because they have to also sell, they have to sell in order to provide.

I have seen small children in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, in West Oakland, in Chicago, and in Harlem with sores on their bodies like those on the boy's face. That is why we have health and food programs, because we are determined to make them healthy again. The women in the film are doing the same thing. They know he is their future and so they give him love and nourishment that he might become a strong man, but not just a man in the physical sense, but that he might become a liberator.

Next we see the boy is healthy and growing, working as a towel boy in the house of prostitution. Then we see the prostitute making love to him. But this was a scene of pure love and therefore it was a sacred and holy act. Even though it was in a house of prostitution, it was not a distorted or corrupt thing. We see this by the very words the woman uses, because she tells the boy that he ain't at the photographer to get his picture taken; she tells him to move. In the background we hear religious music, signifying what is happening and what will happen later. First there is "Wade in the Water", and we recognize that the boy is being baptized; then there is "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," signifying what will happen in the future. The music indicates that this is not a sexual scene,

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this is a very sacred rite, for the boy, who was nourished to health, is now being baptized into manhood. And the act of love, the giving of manhood, is also bestowing upon the boy the characteristics which will deliver him from very difficult situations. People who look upon this as a sex scene miss the point completely; and people who look upon the movie as a sex movie miss the entire message of the film.

What happens is not a distorted act of prostitution even though it takes place in a house of prostitution. The place is profane because of the oppressive conditions, but so are our communities also oppressed. The Black community is often profane because of the dirtiness there, but this is not caused by the people, they are the victims of a very oppressive system. Yet within the heart of the community, just as in the film, the sacred rite of feeding and nourishing the youth goes on; they are brought to their manhood as liberators.

Van Peebles shows this in the film, because when the love scene is completed, the boy is no longer a boy, he has become a man. He doesn't have a climax until he reaches an adult age. Even though we may have sexual intercourse as children, we don't have a climax; it is an introduction which makes it a part of something which is not alien to us. But in the film the climax came at the appropriate time, after he has become a man; that is, he has learned the deep significance of what she was trying to teach him. It wasn't an act or any mechanical sort of thing, but it was the building of his spirit.

So he grows a moustache while he is having sexual intercourse with her, from about 10 years old he ends up about 25. But as soon as he reaches a climax, that is, as soon as he becomes a man, then he is ready to go out and fight. This is symbolized by his putting on his hat, because when you put on your hat, it symbolizes that you are fixing to go somewhere.

The whole film is centered around movement, his putting on the hat to go, and his running and running. I think this shows the alienation he feels in his position. He is constantly in movement or "in the process". When you are in process you are always going or preparing to go. These symbols are used very well.

The oppressor would not view the love scene in the same way, because his whole introduction to sex is from a perverted perspective, divorced from his whole being. That is why he rated the film "X", because what he saw was a sex movie. We know that it is much more than that. He is introduced to sex as something outside of himself, while it is hard for us to remember our first sexual experience. It is not something outside of us. It grows in

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us as any other part of our personality, and it is very integrated just as our arms, our hand or our breathing. This is why it was very necessary to have this young boy having this relationship in a place that is viewed from the outside as dirty and profane, because our community is also considered dirty and profane.

But we do love and we have holy experiences at the same time that we are being stripped of everything else. Then we sell that holiness in order to survive; but it's not holiness anymore, it's transformed by the sale. But nevertheless, the holiness is a part of us, so it serves us. But at the same time the holiness serves us, it remains as dirtiness to the outsider, because he is the cause of the profane conditions of the victims, and also because what he is getting is not love, but the sale of the prostitute.

To the boy she was not a prostitute because there was no money passed, instead she introduced him to the thing that would give him his fullness as a person and his survival in the end. She introduced it to him as a boy because it is said: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6) Of course he won't depart from it, if it becomes an integral part of his personality, because to depart from it is to depart from himself. The women were giving the boy more than simply a survival thing because he was their hope, and this is why they feel happy about the sacrifice they are making. You can see it on their faces when they are feeding him, or at the point of orgasm when the woman tells him that he has a sweet back, and that is where he gets his name. Not only is he baptized into his fullness as a man, he gets his name and his identity in this sacred rite.

Every time after that when Sweet-back engages in sex with a sister, it is always an act of survival, and a step towards his liberation. That is why it is important not to view the movie as a sex film or the sexual scenes as actual sex acts. Van Peebles is righteously signifying to us all. The first scene was far from anything sexual, that is why the holy music during the scene. It is only dealing with sexual symbols, the real meaning is far away from anything sexual, and so deep that you have to call it religious.

When Sweetback puts on his hat he does not leave the house, he does not leave the victim's ghettoes, he graduates and starts to perform there in a freak show. Hewould simulate sexual intercourse before an audience that paid to observe this scene. He starts



Beatle watches police at freak show discuss scapegoat arrest

out playing the part of a dyke, with false breasts and a beard, but then his fairy godmother comes along, he gets his wish and becomes a man before the audience, taking off his beard and showing his penis--it looks like a missile and shocks the audience.

While this is going on, the cops are harassing Beatle, the owner of the cat house. He has been paying them off and doesn't want to be bothered, but they want one of his men as a scapegoat arrest. The cops break off their harassment from time to time and go over to observe the freak show, even though they have seen it many times.

Sweetback is now having sexual intercourse with the sister, but there is no holy music because it is not love; it is a performance given in order to survive. He is selling himself to the audience and the cops who are the real freaks. Dylan's "Ballad of The Thin Man' would apply here, because in the song the freaks go to see the geek who offers them a bone and they don't know why. But you see the audience or the freaks--including the cops-don't have to be there. They cause the conditions which make it necessary for people to go to these lengths to survive, and then they pay to see the performance the people put on. They are the real freaks and the people go through the act with real hostility and hatred for the people who cause them to be there in the first place.

There are also Blacks in the audience, and this is a stroke of genius by Van Peebles, because it symbolizes the total blindness of the audience of freaks. They are laughing at a situation, when they are in fact getting their heads cut off. That's like Dylan's sword swallower, who in the end will thank the audience for the loan, because they were really there, only they did not know it. The scene shows how far the oppressor will go, because when it is asked if anyone in the audience wants to challenge Sweetback, this white boy

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couldn't hold his girlfriend down. The announcer would not let her go out there, because the police were watching.

The police, as I said, are taking payoffs and letting the house exist, and this is an indictment of them. Not only do they cause the conditions, they then pay to go see it, because it is amusing to them. But the freak show is not put on by freaks but by victims. The victim does what he has to do to survive because of his crippled and victimized position. The freak pays him for his laughter and the victim accepts the pay, but with vengeance in mind.

I think that it is ironic and also very symbolic that even while I am writing this, I can look out of my window and see the Oakland Auditorium where the Oakland Police Officers Assoc. is holding its annual circus. I don't see any Blacks going in. We are realizing more and more that it has always been a circus. They have tried to make a circus of our circumstances and our communities, but our awareness is growing and we are moving toward dealing with the situation in a very decisive manner, just like Sweet Sweetback did.

In the film and in the community the oppressor keeps demanding more and more from the victims--that is why they want one of Beatle's men. But this is also why the victim with the lowest levels of awareness will be brought into consciousness and revolutionized because he is doing what he is doing in order to survive, but eventually his very survival is at stake. The oppressor won't even let your acts of survival continue, he tries to totally crush you, so that survival becomes a very revolutionary act. At the point of life and death, all of the hatred for the oppressor is unleashed for survival purposes.

D BLACK PANTHER INTERCOMMUNAL NEWS SERVICE, JUNE 19, 1971

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Moo Moo

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

The police in the film really don't want Sweetback. All they want to do is use him for a cover, because they are going after Moo Moo, the young revolutionary. Sweetback goes along with them because of his low level of consciousness. This is no hard task because when an individual victim acts without awareness of the situation, he is just like the organism that wants to survive. THE UNITY COMES OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

For a short while Moo Moo and Sweetback are handcuffed together, but when the police start to beat the life out of Moo Moo, they separate them and tell Sweetback to stand aside. Sweetback attempts to look away from their beating of Moo Moo.

This shows the arrogance of the aggressor, thinking that he has all the control—his Jehovah complex. He thinks that he has his victims so completely in line, that this freak show performer who is paying them so that he can survive, will have no feelings for another victim.

Sweetback attempts to look away while the police are beating Moo Moo. Just the turning away is showing how much of the time the masses attempt to dismiss the atrocities of the oppressor, even when attempts are made to communicate to them. They will pretend that they are too busy with other things because they are trying to survive; but they fail to realize that their real survival depends upon their social consciousness and therefore unity. The oppressor will demand more and more of them until they will perish without that unity.

At its lowest level, survival is just the organism getting by as an individual person or as an individual family. What they must realize is that the oppressor will not allow that, he will

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keep demanding more—high unemployment, poor housing, poor health and poor education, and more taxes—until their very death. So they attempt to look away; but because of compassion and their identity with the whole situation, they cannot completely turn their backs, and this is what causes the neurosis of some Blacks.

But through Sweetback, Melvin Van Peebles is righteously signifying, and teaching the people what must really be done to survive. When Sweetback realizes that he cannot turn his back, he takes the handcuffs, the chains which have been used to hold him in slavery and he starts to kick ass. Using his handcuffs as a weapon against the oppressor rather than as the tool of submission, he downs both of the policemen, almost cutting off their heads.

This is a very bloody scene, but it was very important that they showed the blood all the way up his arm. It makes me think of the statement by Frantz Fanon in his book The Wretched of The Earth where he says that the peasant creeps into the settler's room at night and cracks the settler's head open. Then the blood spurts across his face, and it is the only baptism he ever remembered.

The Black audiences really respond to this scene, because it is another baptism; but instead of wading in the water as Sweetback did earlier, this is a baptism in the blood. As each blow went down, you could hear the tension being released in the audience, because right at that moment it was a climax for the audience.

One of the few criticisms I have of this film is that there is no religious music behind this scene. This is no more a scene of violence than the earlier baptism was one of sex;

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AND DECLES DATES AND AND CAREFURE TO THE FOREST TO THE PARTY.

it was a growing into manhood. Sweetback grew into a man when he was in bed with that woman and he also grew to be a man when he busted the heads of his oppressors there. When he was with the woman, it was like a holy union, and when he takes the heads of his oppressors, it is like taking the sacrament for the first time. In the first baptism he did not become a whole man because he went into that freak show, but when he is baptized in the blood, he righteously moves on to a higher level, because the next time he is with the police with handcuffs on, he gets away, and the time after than when he is with the police with handcuffs on in that pool hall, he knows what he must do and he does

Like I said before, Van Peebles is righteously signifying, because he engages the audience in a climax in the scene when Sweetback downs the police. What he does is equate the most ecstatic moments in the film with the actions he is encouraging the people to engage in, so he is advocating a bloody overthrow, because the victims want to survive.

The next point that Van Peebles develops in the film is the need of the Black community for greater unity, and how the lack of unity will only deliver us into the hands of our oppressors. What happens? Sweetback helps Moo Moo get up, but then Sweetback goes his own way and makes it back to the cat house and there he encounters Beatle. Beatle starts to give him advice, but everybody recognizes that Beatle is not really responding to Sweetback's situation. Van Peebles gets this point across beautifully. While he is giving this advice, Beatle is sitting on the toilet. He wipes himself, gets up, and without washing his hands, he takes a towel and wipes his face. This is signifying that what is coming out of Beatle's mouth is the same thing that is coming out the other end-shit and nothing else. Notice that Sweetback never says a word to Beatle, but he does not have to, because Beatle is deaf--he cannot hear what is being said anyway.

When he leaves Beatle the camera shows Sweetback with a terrifying look on his face. He has realized that those he knows best have such a low level of awareness that he cannot expect aid from them. He realizes that the lack of unity is a very hurting thing, and when he walks out of Beatle's place, he walks right into the hands of the police, who pretend to be nice until they realize that he is not playing the part of the meek victim. Then they work him over thoroughly.

Sweetback is saved by that same community unity he failed to find with Beatle. The people rescue him by pretending to be in need of money, and

SWEET SWEETBACK

therefore they offer to wash the car of the police. Instead they are engaging in a very revolutionary act and they save the brother from the oppressor, while at the same time delivering a deadly blow to the police. What Sweetback has done for Moo Moo is repeated for him by the community.

Sweetback is on his own now, but he is locked into a pair of handcuffs. How does he get them off? Through unity. He goes to a woman who he has been with before, and she tells him to beg. This is obviously not the first time this has happened, but Sweetback cannot beg anymore because he has been transformed by the baptism in blood. He needs her at this moment, but sexuality cannot be based on war any longer, it has to be based on love and unity. He makes love to her and after that the handcuffs are off. This signifies that it is the unity between the Black man and the Black woman which is able to liberate them both.

In his first baptism Sweetback acquired the ability to love, but he could only truly love and unify with the woman, when he had done away with the people who made his woman the oppressor's woman and himself the oppressor's man. Then they could really have the unity which is symbolic of the liberating love of the Black man and woman.

Sweetback is on his own again, but this time without the handcuffs. In the meantime the film takes us back to the cat house and his old boss Beatle. Beatle is being hassled by the police who want to know where to find Sweetback.

Beatle doesn't really know, but if he did, he would have told them, because Beatle has no consciousness, he is deaf. And to prove how true this is, the police finally deafen him.

Sweetback moves through the community, looking for the assistance he needs to get away. He doesn't get all that he needs, but he gets all that each can give. At the church he gets a Black Ave Maria and the power sign. The minister recognizes that his religion is a hype, because he tells Sweetback that Moo Moo is giving the people the real religion.

At the gambling den he gets little apparent sympathy. The manager keeps telling him he is a dead man, and he really does not need money. In this scene Van Peebles is again showing the community of the victimized, just like the performers in the freak show, because the manager explains to Sweetback that he cannot make any money on his operation. By the time he gets finished paying off everybody who is exploiting him, he pays a dollar and a dime for every dollar he makes. This is another example of the oppressor demanding more and more



Unity between the Black man and woman can liberate both of them

of the victims.

But the gambler does what he canhe gives Sweetback a ride. There is
some unity, but not enough; and during
the ride Sweetback spots Moo Moo, the
man he left behind, and they are reunited. This is as it should be, because Sweetback is leaving the community with the person who was the
beginning of all this, Moo Moo. They
are two unlike characters, but yet
they are linked together.

Moo Moo symbolizes the revolutionary who is trying to free the people, his whole program is pointed toward people like Sweetback, community people who are very unaware, yet they are trying to survive. Sweetback then symbolizes the most unconscious persons in the community, people who are sometimes viewed as more worthless than the pimp. Sweetback is not a pimp and would not do as much as a pimp would; he is much less aggressive. A pimp will work at putting girls on the block, watching them, collecting money, beating them and controlling them. He may also steal and deal in dope and so forth. Sweetback won't do any of this and yet the women love him, because he's got such a sweet sweet back. He will just stay home and the women will bring him everything he needs. He accepts their goods, but he doesn't care what they do. So the sweetback is actually more worthless than the pimp on one level, because he won't take the chances that a pimp would to survive. He has submitted more, almost to the point where he is a vegetable and is just taken care of. So the fact that Sweetback would not stand any more victimization, that he identified with Moo Moo as being one of the victims, and the fact that Moo Moo's revolutionary program is pointed to the lowest level of consciousness in the community means that even though they are unlike characters, even

though Moo Moo is young and Sweetback is older, it is not unlikely that they would be bound together because they are, in fact.

When the gamblers get Sweetback and Moo Moo to the edge of town, they tell Sweetback to buy himself a last supper because he is a dead man. Their level of consciousness is so low that they will help him to a point, but they still believe that ultimately the oppressor will triumph and Sweetback will die.

Sweetback and Moo Moo are determined to survive, however, and they begin their journey. The encounter with the motorcycle gang shows a number of things. First of all it is a triumph of the soul force (which the women gave Sweetback in the first' scene) over all the mechanical developments of the oppressor. When he is challenged to a wrestling duel, the gang leader picks up a motorcycle to show brute strength. Then with the knife the gang leader shows how effectively they have mastered this weapon. When the gang leader reveals herself to be a woman, Sweetback knows that she is no match for the weapon he chooses. The gang promises to do them in after she does him in, but in the end "the Pres" is laid out on the ground in complete submission. The Black women showed him the way to liberation and he used his knowledge effectively.

Van Peebles is also signifying other things in the motorcycle gang scene. First of all there is the symbol of the strength of the white woman over the white man--and they don't even know it. Then there is the symbol of the Aryan--the superior race. The president of the gang is big and robust, the image of white superiority. The only criticism I have here is that her hair should have been blonde rather than reddish, but the idea gets across. The idea also comes across that the

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HE WON'T BLEED ME A REVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS OF SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG BY HUEY P. NEWTON, MINISTER OF DEFENSE, THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY, SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE

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people have the ability to triumph over all these symbols of oppression. Unity will save us.

I should point out that in his duel with the Aryan someone has stuck a derby hat and a silly little tie on Sweetback. It is like a performance, a minstrel show or a cakewalk thing. But Sweetback takes off the derby hat and in that way he tells the others that this is no performance, this is dealing for survival. He deals and he survives, much to their disappointment, and they roar off on their motorcycles, leaving their conquered leader on the floor.

Some of the gang betray Moo Moo and Sweetback telling them that since Sweetback has won the duel, they will take care of him and Moo Moo by giving them shelter in a mountain cabin; they instead send the police. This cabin contains a pool hall and when the police arrive, Moo Moo and Sweetback are playing pool. When the police enter, Sweetback offers his hands for the cuffs but then moves, using them to down one policeman. But he is without a weapon to deal with the other one and Mon Mon has been shot. Sweetback uses familiar survival techniques, however, because he deals with what he has available to him. The pool cue becomes a spear and he staves the policeman through the chest, and then drills him all the way to the hilt of the cue. It is not technology that saves him, it is his ability to use the familiar features of the Black community. There is another important message.

The rest of the scenes show the unity of the community and its creativity in dealing with survival situations. Sweetback sends Mod Mod on a motorcycle because he is the future. Then he makes it on his feet, by himself. He makes his plea to his feet to do their thing and they never fail him. All he has is his feet and one knife, and he gets by.

In the meantime the police are in the conference room and the commissioner tells them he wants the cop killers and niggers. Then he calls the Black policemen aside to apologize. They never say a word during the movie, but in their faces you see that they are dead. They are dead, because they are separated from the community of victims of which they are a part.

The police vamp on the entire community. They raid a motel and rip out the eyes of a brother. When they realize that he is not Sweetback their reply is "So What?" Melvin Van Peebles is making it plain that we are all sweetbacks and we are all united in this victimization. At one point they bring

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Beatle to the morgue to identify a body as Sweetback; they run their games again with some speech about democracy and communism. They use their idea of bourgeois democracy against the community; but Beatle is a deaf man, and has been deaf for a long time. In some respects he is also a blind man, because even though he operates a cat house and survives, he cannot read. They are the cause of his problems, he cannot hear, he cannot see, yet they want him to be a "responsible citizen" and help them. We see that Beatle has been subjected to the Biblical dictum: "Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hand or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire." (Matthew 18: 8-9)

Van Peebles is continuing to signify and send out messages to the Black community. When Beatle sees that the corpse in the morgue is not Sweetback, he breaks up with joy. He gains his hearing in a sense, and also his sight. "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:25) We see the message very clearly because the camera immediately switches to a shoe shine stand where the brother is shining the man's shoes with his ass, and he is really telling the man, for Beatle, what he can do.

munity searching for Sweetback, and the people stand as one. They don't know anything. The message here to the community is to "stop snitching", there is need for unity, not for revealing our secrets. When I was in the penitentiary I learned the worse crime one inmate can accuse another of is snitching. Van Peebles shows how the community can avoid this and save themselves from their oppressors.

In the meantime we see Sweetback making it through the edges of the city and heading for the desert. He has none of the high-powered technology of the oppressor, but he does have his feet. In one scene we see him going by a large factory, it looks like a chemical plant or something like that. Here you see the drama being symbolized to its fullest, Sweetback with his feet, making it on by the man's highest manifestation of technological skill, and you realize that this is the drama develop-



Police will deafen



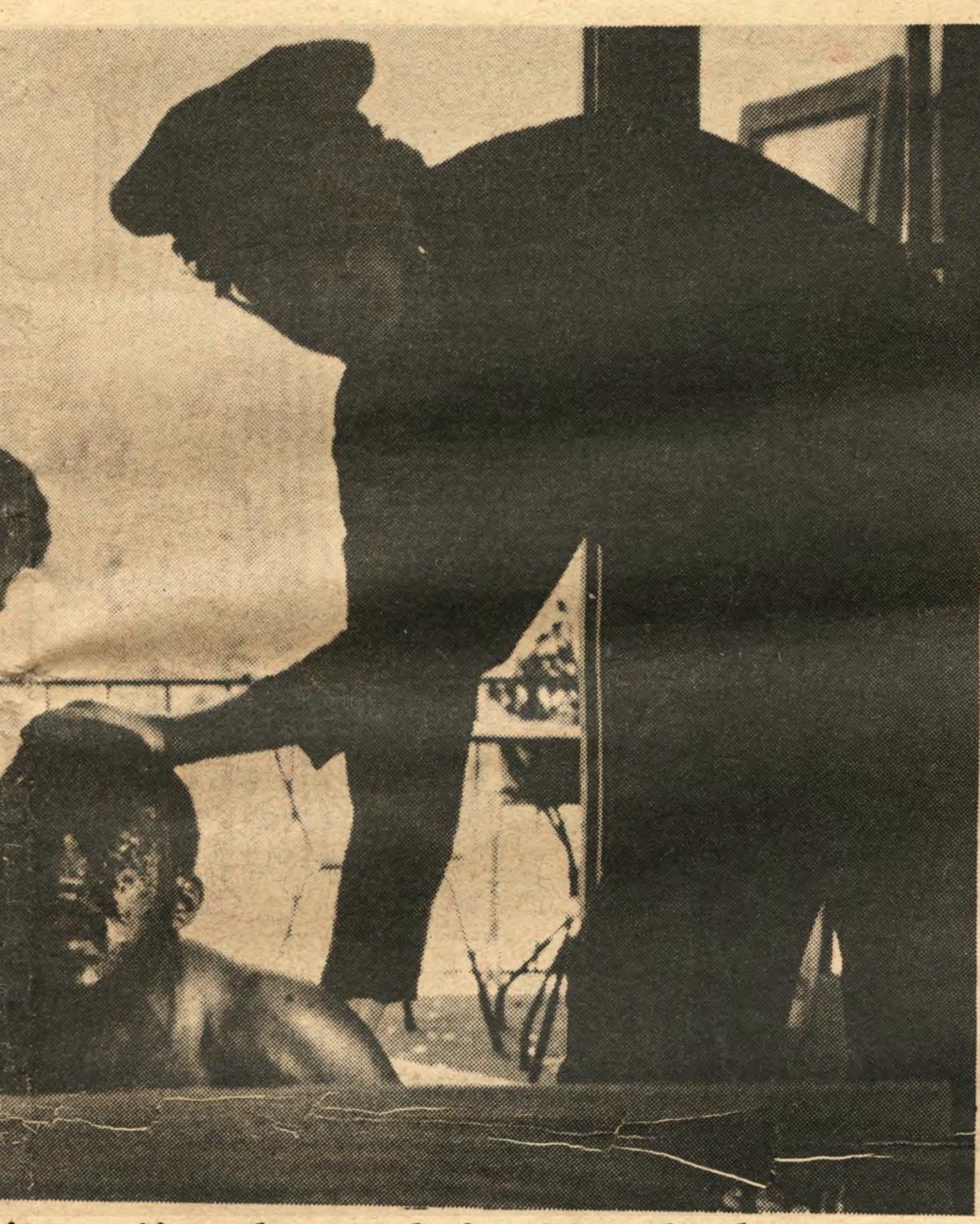
Police rip out Black man's eyes in



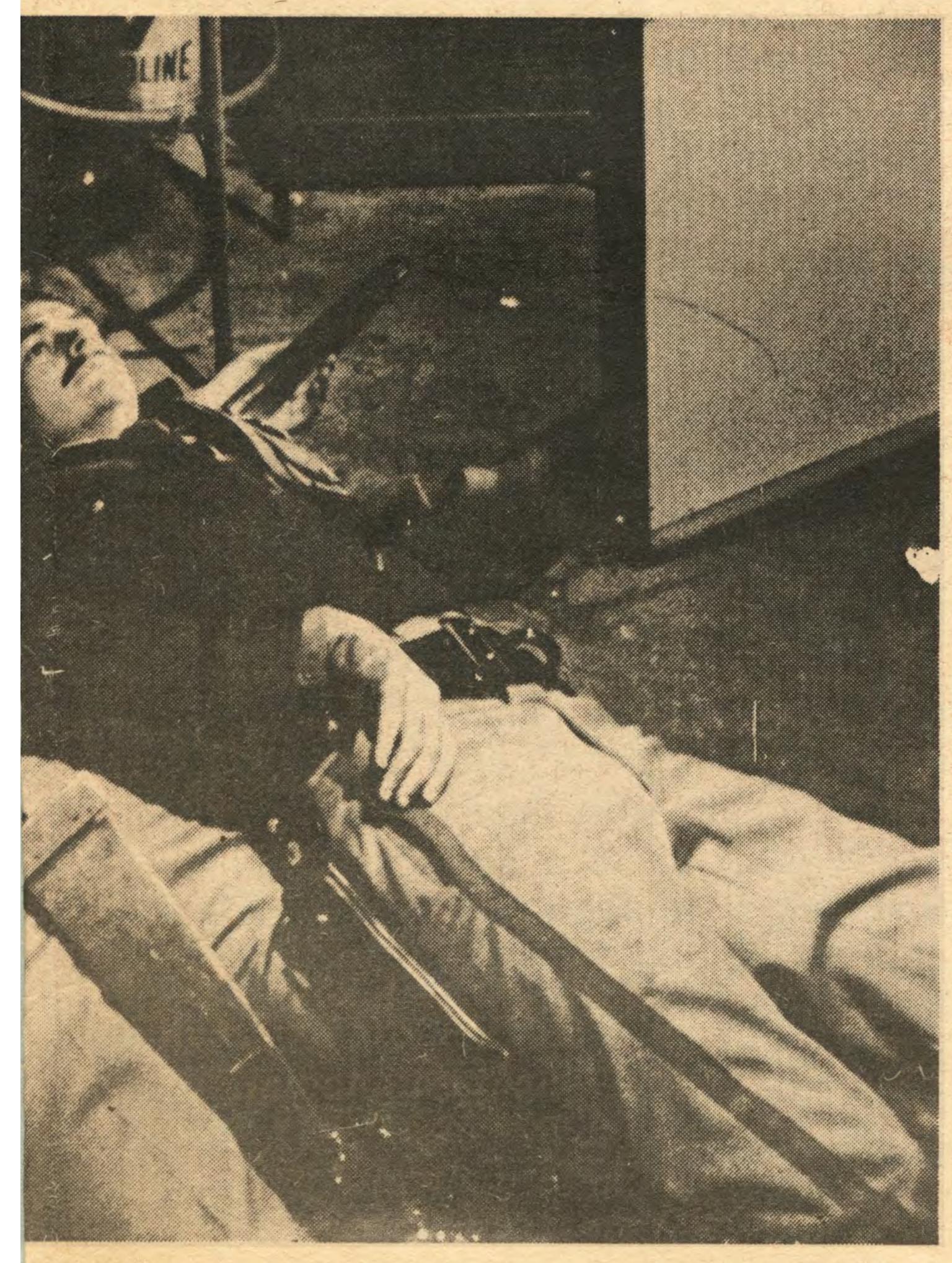
Sweetback has downed two



en Beatle to find Sweetback



in continued search for Sweetback



wo move bo

ing, the soul-force of the people against the technology of the oppressor. The only question is which will win? The answer is given by Sweetback in his

plea to his feet, he says:

Come on feet cruise for me come on legs come on run come on feet do your thing who put the bad mouth on me anyway the way I pick em up and put em down even if it got my name on it won't catch me now.

There is Sweetback's answer to the oppressor's technology, even if the bullet has his name on it, it won't catch him now. Why? Because Sweetback has feet, and they will save him.

This is also the beginning of the dialogue between the running Sweetback and the colored angels. As soon as he hits the desert where the situation is really going to be bad, the colored angels come in and try to discourage him, but he has feet, he has heart, and he has courage, and in the dialogue he resists their discouragement as much as he resists the technology of the police who are always searching.

Now I would like to discuss the movie from a different angle, instead of a scene-by-scene analysis I want to talk about some of the important ideas signified in various scenes. Some of these ideas have been mentioned already, but I think that it is important to re-state them because Melvin Van Peebles uses them so effectively and he is trying to advance our awareness and understanding, so we repeat for

added emphasis.

The first key idea or concept which I think the movie presents to us is the need for unity among all the members and institutions within the community of victims. We see the idea of unity between the young and the old beautifully expressed in the love and care which the women give to the young boy, and also in the concern Sweetback expresses for Moo Moo after he realizes that he is truly unified with Moo Moo. You will recall that Sweetback has an actual dialogue at only six points in the movie, three of these points are in relationship to Moo Moo. So the revolutionary and the righteous street brother see their functional unity. When Sweetback first downs the cops and saves Moo Moo, Moo Moo then asks Sweetback where are we going? What does Sweetback say? "Where did you get that 'we' shit?" This indicates that Sweetback does not understand his need for unity with Moo Moo. Yet after his encounter with Beatle, Sweetback realizes that he cannot depend on his boss, the guy he should have been able to depend on, but Moo Moo was somewhere out there being hunted and so was Sweetback--and they were united.

Then when the gamblers are giving Sweetback a ride to the edge of town he spots Moo Moo and he tells his comrades to stop. This is the second time he speaks about the revolutionary. Now when Moo Moo gets in the car he tells the brothers who he is, but they still don't see their need for unity, because to them he is not Moo Moo, he is the guy who got their partner into trouble. They blame the victim rather than those who victimize him, but this is because of their low level of awareness. Sweetback did that earlier, but he was revolutionized by his awareness of the true situation. Our unity will come out of consciousness, and this is the point of the movie, to raise the consciousness of the Black community.

The movie also demonstrates the functional unity between the present and the future. Once again we see this in the women giving nouvishment and love to the boy who is their future-their liberator. If they did not feed him now and give him the strength to survive until his revolutionary consciousness is aroused, then he will not be able to liberate them. So pending the revolution they must do all they can

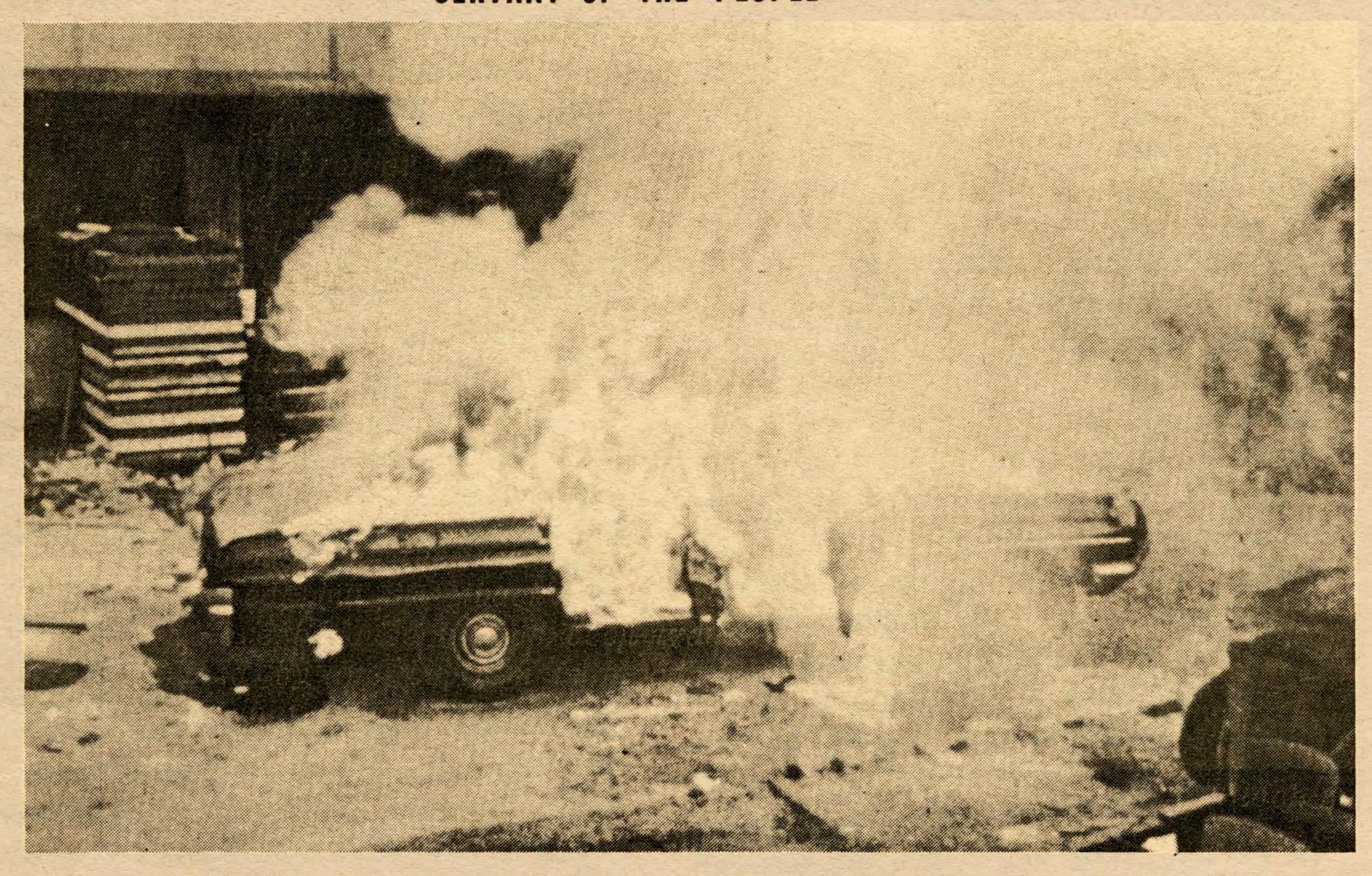
to help him survive.

We also see the unity between the present and the future when Sweetback visits the church. He gets no help but he gets a little more understanding of the true nature of his contribution to the community. The minister tells him that what he did for Moo Moo was the correct thing. He says: "You saved the plant that they were planning to nip in the bud. That's why the Man's down on you." Then later when Sweetback has another chance to escape, but without Moo Moo. he tells the Black motorcyclist to take the young brother instead. The motorcyclist asks Sweetback if he knows what he is doing and he replies: "He's our future, Brer. Take him."

The movie also demonstrates the value of unity among the entire Black community. This is shown at the very beginning when the movie titles appear indicating that the movie is starring THE BLACK COMMUNITY. There is no hero, there is no one outstanding individual, there is the community. At the end there are some names of participants, but it does not even tell what roles they played. This is all an attempt to play down the individualistic approach to our survival in favor of an expression of unity among the entire community.

This unity is also demonstrated by the fact that Sweetback has almost no dialogue in the entire movie. He says hardly anything at all. Why? Because the movie is not starring Sweetback, it is starring the Black community. Most of the audiences at the movie are Black and they talk to the screen. They supply the dialogues, because all of us are Sweetback, we are all in the same predicament of being victims.

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In unity, the community burned a police car to help Sweetback

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This is clearly seen when Sweetback comes back to Beatle for help. Sweetback says nothing, but Beatle lets it come out of both ends. The audience replies to Beatle for Sweetback, and they supply the dialogue. This happens throughout the film. So the thing to do is not just see the film, but also to recognize how you the viewer are also an actor in the film, because you are as much a victim of this oppressive system as Sweetback.

The unity of the community is shown throughout the film and we should get the message the brother is signifying to us. When the community sets the police car afire and saves Sweetback, that is an expression of unity. When they deny ever having seen him in order to permit him to escape, that is an expression of unity. When they raid the motel and rip the brother's eye out, they say "So what?" when told this is not Sweetback. But it is Sweetback in a sense, because the brother is another victim, like all of us are. When Beatle is rolled up to the morgue and realizes that the body they show him is not Sweetback, he sees his unity as a victim with his brother he failed to help who is also a victim. And Beatle cracks up laughing--they are unified. And in the next scene at the shoeshine stand Van Peebles signifies to the man that he can kiss his ass.

Another expression of unity in the film is the power symbol. When the minister tells Sweetback the significance of the job he has done for Moo Moo, he then says a Black Ave Maria for him, but ends up giving him the power sign--unity. Then when Moo Moo gets on the motorcycle to escape and then leave Sweetback, this is different from their first parting. They give

each other a soul shake, so that even though they go separate ways they are unified.

Finally the film demonstrates the importance of unity and love between Black men and women. This is shown again in the scene where the woman makes love to the young boy but in fact baptizes him into his true manhood. Then again when the woman makes love to Sweetback and then gets the handcuffs off him, we see that these are not sex scenes, they are love scenes in a very holy and righteous context. The second woman wants Sweetback to beg, but he can beg no longer because he has been transformed. His baptism in the blood transformed him--he has ripped off his oppressors and he is truly a man; he can never beg again, and he does not.

For a long time the Black community has been a collection of people who survive together in one place, but unity is essential for liberation as well as survival. When we have this unity, the faith of one becomes the faith of another as in the case of Sweetback and Moo Moo. When we have our consciousness increased to the point that we understand this, we will have our unity. But we must understand that the victimizers will always try to prevent this unity.

Another idea the film gets across is the different point of view between the victim and the victimizer. The victimizers cannot accept the reality and truth of the view of the victims, and therefore they say that the victims are always wrong in their view of reality. Indeed, they even go so far as to signify that the victims cannot control and direct their own lives. This is seen first of all in the fact that the film is labeled with an "X" rating. This is an

act of the victimizers, trying to control what we shall see, and more than that, trying to say that the ways in which we are forced to survive are profane and dirty. They say that we are like freaks in a show; but we understand that in fact the freaks are those who force us to live in wretched conditions, they may be profane conditions to the oppressors, but we know how to make our conditions a survival situation and we do not see ourselves as profane. The oppressors see Sweetback as a sex film, but if we truly understand ourselves and unify with Sweetback, we will see that the film advocates a bloody overthrow of the oppressor. Melvin Van Peebles is righteously signifying.

The view of the victims is seen in many ways. One of them is in the understanding of Moo Moo and Sweetback. They both know that they are victims, although Moo Moo has not really gotten his complete program together for the community. Yet they seek the same goals of freedom and liberation, and they recognize that sometimes you have to use stern stuff to accomplish your goals. They also recognize that even though the community may not support you entirely, they will support you to a point and that you must go as far as the community will go, and then move out on your own, leading the people to a higher level of consciousness. Sweetback relies on the community much more than Moo Moo, because he understands that revolution is a process, going from A to B to C and so forth, rather than trying to get the people to jump from A to Z.

The oppressor does not understand this, he does not understand the strength of the will of the people. When the two policemen catch Sweetback after he leaves Beatle's place, they are friendly because they cannot accept the idea that the community will free itself. So they ask Sweetback how many people were in the ambush? How did they work it? The oppressors cannot accept the idea that the oppressed could do this without a lot of planning, without a large number of people. It was Sweetback and Moo Moo, but to the victimizer it had to be more than that. A difference in point of view, a point of view which is too often used to control us, but we must make our own point of view prevail.

Another difference in point of view is seen with the chains which are used on Sweetback twice in the film. To the oppressor they are the chains which keep us in a submissive position, but each time for Sweetback, the oppressed, they become tools of liberation. We will be even stronger when we learn how to turn the oppressor's tools against him, rather than submitting to them.

Another idea which Melvin Van

Peebles puts across is the uselessness of cultist behavior in our struggle for survival and liberation. In earlier issues of the paper I have talked about the revolutionary cultist, the cultural cultist, and the religious cultist. Van Peebles strikes some heavy blows at the religious and cultural cultists. For example, the minister understands that he is not moving the people toward their true liberation. He tells Sweetback that what he is doing is giving the people a hype, which gives them a little happiness, but he then goes on to say that Moo Moo and the younger guys are laying down the real religion. So this is a blow against those religions in the Black community which do not help people deal with the conditions which back's arms each time he downs the technology, but in his own interest. drive them to their knees, but instead want to keep the people on their knees.

The strongest blow against cultist behavior, however, is saved for the cultural cultists. We see this in the African garb which the minister is wearing. This is signifying that a lot of cultural nationalism and the meaningless religions in the community are deceiving the people in the same ways.

In another way the film makes this point more strongly and also indicates the true way to liberation, When Sweetback arrives at the gambler's den, the men around the table are engaged in a conversation. The manager has complained to Sweetback that he cannot even make any money on this operation because he is paying off so many others. Cultural cultists offer many empty solutions to our oppression, and this scene hits at these solutions.

After the manager's speech one gambler says: "And Africa shall stretch forth her arms," and then another replies "Yeah, and bring back a bloody stump." Now we have to understand the true issue in order to see this as a blow at cultural nationalists, who are cultural cultists-with African clothes, bones, and other things, but no way to liberate the people. Cultural cultists, who try to claim that they have the way, often use this scripture to support their ideas: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." (Psalms 68:31) You can see that what Van Peebles is signifying is that those who use such meaningless arguments to mislead the people have nothing to offer because when they stretch forth their arms, they will draw back a bloody stump. Still, however, Van Peebles does show us how a bloody stump may not be a meaningless thing, if we get out of that cultist bag. How does he do this? He shows the blood on Sweet-



"I will say a Black Ave Maria for you."

cops. In his first baptism by blood, there is blood all the way up to his elbow. And later when he downs the cops in the poolroom, there is blood up to his elbow again. That is the true route to liberation, stern action when the situation demands that you seize the time, and turn away from cultist behavior.

There is another key idea which comes through repeatedly, and that is the ability of the people to survive even under the harshest conditions. We do this by using the means available to us and never worrying about the fact that we don't have all the technology that the oppressor has. You will recall that Sweetback was in chains and in the back of the police car when the people "washed" it with gasoline. What did the Brother do? He made it out of the car and then walked right through the police and firemen who were arriving to try and deal with the situation. He walked right through them--he did not panic and run, he just calmly turned a situation of oppression to his advantage.

Later on when Sweetback and Moo Moo had separated for the final time, the Brother was faced with a very difficult situation, and he had very little to carry him through. But when the colored angels began to get down on him, he told them "I got feet." This was again symbolizing survival. It was not simply that he had feet, however, he also had the ability to use the technology of the oppressor in his own interest. He did not become discouraged because he had no car. Van Peebles could have had him steal a car, but instead he had Sweetback use the basic skills of survival, with nothing but the things he had learned for surviving the oppressor for so many years on the block. He doesn't have a car, but he rides--on the top of a truck. inside the back of another truck, on a freight train, he uses the oppressor's

He also survives by using the system against itself. He meets another traveler and pays him to change clothes and run when he is chased. This throws the police off his trail and helps him survive, but it also means that he ends up with clothes which are much more suitable for his long run across the desert. Later in the film, when he is near the border and the dogs are after him, the two men--the owner of the of the dogs and the police--get into a fight among themselves about whether the dogs will be untied. This is all to Sweetback's advantage, turning the oppressors against each other, and he makes his escape.

In another way he survives the way that the Black community has always survived, by using the resources at his command even though they are not the resources others would use. Survival forces some very harsh decisions on us. When his wound is causing him to suffer, he urinates upon the earth and uses his own urine to make a mudpack which he applies to the wound--it produces a rapid healing. These are the kinds of home remedies we have long had to use because we could not get proper medical attention. Later, we see him bathing his face in a pool of muddy water. It sustains him. When I saw it I thought of that song which says "I'd rather drink muddy water, and sleep in a hollowed out log, than stay here and be treated like a dirty dog."

These are survival techniques all the audience can identify with because they realize they are necessary. They don't identify with the time he catches that lizard and downs it, raw. But this is no different from the times when we had to eat the chitterlings, hog maws, and other foods, not because we wanted to, but because that was all we had to eat. We may deny it, we may not identify with it, but it carried

HE WON'T BLEED ME

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The very chains of the oppressor can become the tools of liberation

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us through. And the point we should understand is that if you do not submit to the oppressor, you may be forced to make some harsh decisions, eat some undesirable foods, but this is better than being well-fed in some social prison.

Sweetback has only one tool with him, his knife, and he uses it very effectively. It reminds me of that point in The Wretched of the Earth where Fanon says that if you don't have a gun, then a knife will do. He uses his knife to escape at the rock concert, by pretending to be making love to the girl in the bushes. He uses the knife against the lizard. And then when he hears the dogs coming after him, he again pulls it out and he uses it-he really deals. But we should know it would be this way, because earlier in the pool room when he was facing the policeman with a gun what did Sweetback have? A tool the community knows how to use very effectively, a pool cue. But he did not use it to down pool balls, he turned it into a spear and downed the oppressor. You don't need a gun, what you need is the consciousness of what it will take to survive and prevail in any given situation -and then act accordingly.

So what I have done is given you a scene-by-scene analysis of the movie, then an analysis of some of the major ideas and concepts which the movie puts forth. Now I will show how the movie also raises the consciousness of the community by analyzing it in terms of some aspects of the ideology of the Black Panther Party. We see ideology as a systematic way of thinking about phenomena, not as some set of abstract conclusions. Our approach is one that uses dialectical materialism, which holds that contradictions are the ruling principle of the universe. Everywhere,

in all of life, the social forces, the natural forces, and the biological and physical forces, we can find contradictions. What we mean is that in every phenomenon there is a contradiction between opposing forces which struggle to gain domination over each other. We call this the thesis and antithesis, or the unity of the opposites. Because these opposites are both unified and constantly in struggle with one another, they give motion to the matter composing the phenomenon. So we say that matter is constantly in motion, or constantly in a state of transformation. The transformation takes place in a dialectical manner, with the thesis struggling against the antithesis; these are the contradictions. The struggle is resolved in a synthesis, which contains elements of the old contradictions, but is at a higher level, and then a new set of contradictions arises.

The essence of the ideology of the Black Panther Party is that we recognize that matter is constantly in transformation in a dialectical manner. But when we understand this and understand the forces in operation, we can control them and direct them in a manner which is beneficial for the community. Therefore what we want to do is understand the contradictions within every aspect of the Black community and move on them by trying to increase the positive side of each contradiction until it comes to dominate the negative side. This is how we define power--the ability to define phenomena and make them act in a desired manner.

If you understand where the Panther is coming from, you will understand that Sweet Sweetback is a beautiful exemplification of Black Power, for what he does is decide how he wants things to come out and then he makes

them act in a desired manner. The movie is also an exemplification of the dialectical analysis and the constant transformation of phenomena. I don't know whether Melvin Van Peebles was aware of this when he made the movie, but it does have these features, and probably so because the Panther ideology is an extremely effective approach to all phenomena. It gives us lots of insight and understanding.

For example, we say that all phenomena contain contradictions with positive and negative qualities. To control the situation, then, what you must do is increase the positive qualities of any phenomenon until they dominate the negative qualities. Sweetback does this on a number of occasions. Take for example the chains. The handcuffs are definitely negative when they are used to keep him in submission; but when Sweetback realizes that he can ignore the beating of Moo Moo no longer, what is he to use for a weapon? Then the same chains which were used to bind become tools of liberation-their positive qualities are used to overcome their negative qualities. He did this again when he was caught by the police in the pool room--he offered his hands for the chains. Not because he wanted them, but because he realized that this would put the police off their guard, and also give him another weapon to use against them. We see this again, when the police are using helicopters, cars and guns and the radio to track down Sweetback. What does he use? Their technology; but in a positive way--he hitches rides on trucks and trains, and they help to deliver him from the jaws of the monsters who are using the most advanced technology to try and capture him. If we understand dialectical materialism, we will understand more about how to look at both the positive and negative qualities of phenomena so that we can control our destiny.

The film also shows the positive and negative features of community institutions. In other articles I have said that the Black Panther Party was wrong in its blanket condemnations of community institutions, instead of analyzing their qualities. The movie shows the positive and negative features of the church, for example. The minister is saying to Sweetback that he has nothing to offer the community, he can only give the people a hype which will bring them a little bit of happiness in their misery, and he cannot offer Sweetback a hide-out because the police--("the Man") knows everything. This shows his negative and reactionary side. At the same time we see his positive and progressive side, because he is operating a withdrawal center where people addicted to drugs can come and dry out. There is no blanket condemnation, he shows the church making a real contribution to the survival of the community. What

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SWEET SWEET BACK

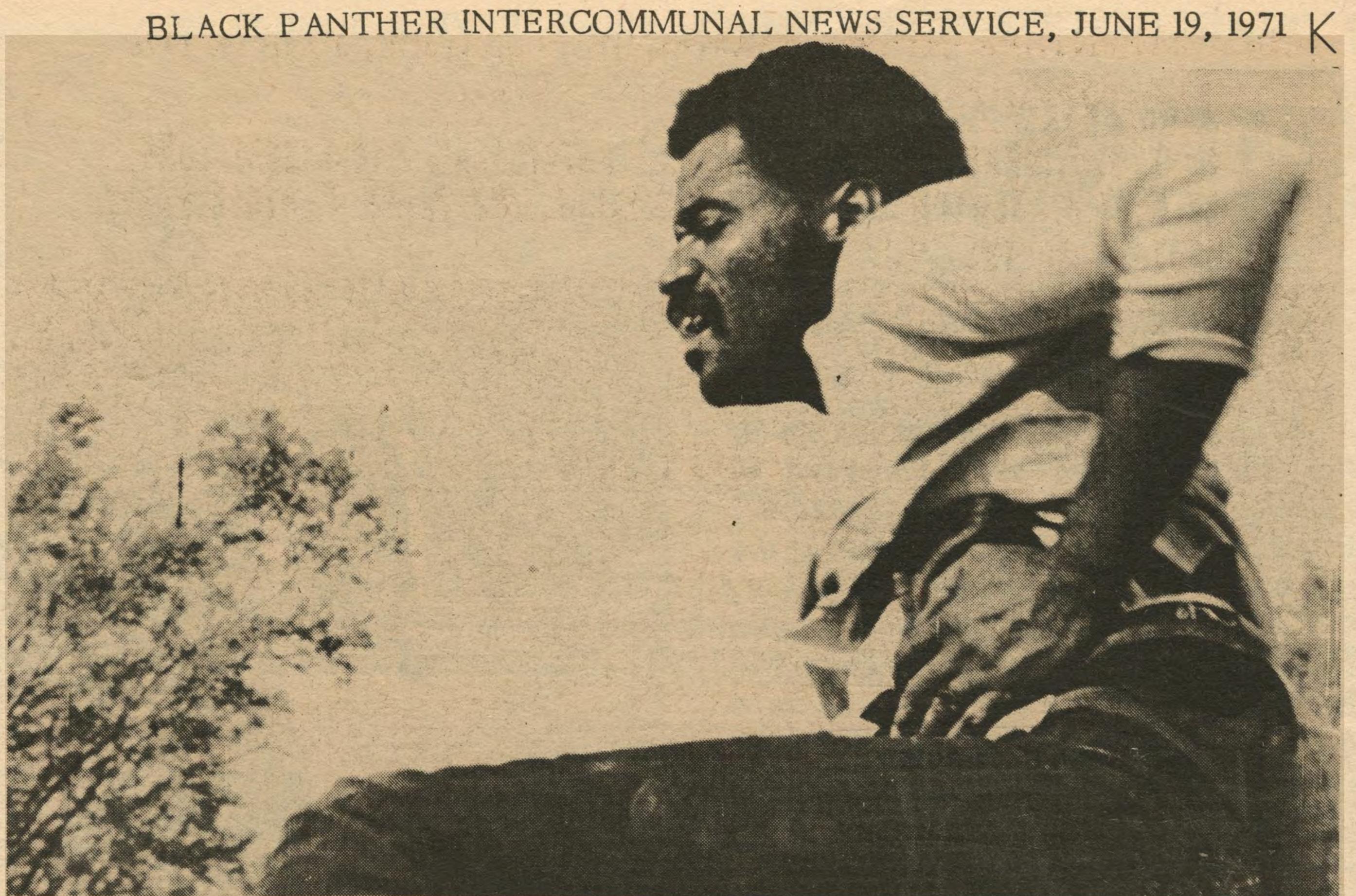
needs to happen is for people with a higher level of consciousness to increase the positive contribution the church makes until the positive becomes the most important feature of

the church, then it will be able to do more for the people.

The same is true in the case of the gambler. He cannot offer Sweetback any money, he is exploiting and he is also exploited, and when the Brother really needs help he has no money to give him. What's more, the advice he gives is worthless because he says that Sweetback is dead and tells him to get himself a last supper. But there is also a positive quality to the gambler, because he will give Sweetback and Moo Moo a ride for part of the way. Actually he can give them a ride all the way to the border, but he will only give them a ride to the edge of town where they run into the motorcycle gang. But the point is made very well, that you have to work with the people as far as they will go, and not jump too far ahead by forcing them to do things they do not want to do at that particular level of consciousness. So he carries the positive qualities of the gambler as far as they will go, and then strikes out again. This is taking your revolution from point A to point B, rather than trying to jump from A to Z in one step. We have to find out what the people will do and get them to do that much.

The progression of the people as their consciousness increases is shown in the case of Beatle. At first Beatle is an individual surviving at a basic level, running a cat house and then giving up one of his men in order to continue to operate. Then Beatle offers advice which is nothing more than a pile of dung. Next we see Beatle going through the revolutionizing process, because if he knew where Sweetback was, he would have told on him. But because he was deaf before and because he cannot cooperate with the police, they actually deafen him--the conditions revolutionize him. When we next see Beatle it is in the morgue scene and he cracks up as he realizes that Sweetback has escaped - they are unified. Beatle has seen that he also is a victim and there can be no cooperation with the oppressor because they will bleed you to death; if you want to live you have to resist. And the shoe shine man uses his ass on the shoes of his oppressor.

There is also a progression within the community. They rescue Sweet-back, and aid him as much as they can in his escape, then they become deaf to their oppressors. That is a way of hearing the plea of Sweetback to his feet and giving him enough lead time to let his feet do their job:



The Black community must survive

The community's progression is also shown in the transformation of the colored angels. We hear the voices of the community as the police search for Sweetback, but when he reaches the desert we hear the voices of the angels in a dialogue with Sweetback. On the record Melvin Van Peebles refers to this as an opera (an opera is merely a story told in song), and the dialogue between Sweetback and the angels is really Sweet Sweetback's

BaadAsssss Song. In the book Van Peebles refers to the angels first as colored angels, then he refers to them as Black angels. On the record he refers to them as Reggin (spell it backwards) angels. The point is that the angels are against the interests of Sweetback, but they are transformed, because their interests are in fact the same as his. This is the dialogue with the angels, the baadasssss song:

If you cant beat em join em Thats what they say

You talkin bout yesterday

You cant go on like that Sweetback Not long as your face is Black

Yeah I'm Black and I'm keepin on Keepin on the same ole way

They bopped your mama
They bopped your papa

Wont bop me

They bopped your sister
They bopped your brother

They bopped your brother
They wont bop me

THEY BURNED OUR MAMAS
THEY BEAT OUR PAPAS
THEY TRICKED OUR SISTERS
THEY CHAINED OUR BROTHERS
WONT BLEED ME

WONT BLEED ME
WONT BLEED ME
They bled your mama
They bled your papa

But he wont bleed me

Use your Black ass from sun to sun Niggers scared and pretend they don't see Deep down dirty dog scared

Just like you Sweetback

Just like I used to be

Work your Black behind to the gums
And you supposed to thomas tell he done

You got to thomas Sweetback

They bled your brother
They bled your sister
Yeah but they wont bleed me

Progress Sweetback
Thats what he wants you to believe
No progress Sweetback
He aint stopped clubbing us for 400 years
And he dont intend to for a million
He sure treat us bad Sweetback
We can make him do us better

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Chicken aint nothing but a bird White man aint nothing but a turd Nigger aint shit

Get my hands on a trigger
You talkin revolution Sweetback
I wanta get off these knees
You talkin revolution Sweetback

You can't make it on wings
Wheels or steel Sweetback
We got feet
You can't get away on wings
wheels or steel Sweetback
Niggers got feet

Your brother and your sister too

He bled your brother

He bled your sister

How come it took me so long to see
How he get us to use each other
Niggers scared
We got to get it together if he kicks a brother
It gotta be like he kickin your mother
They hype you into sopping the

Marrow out your own bones
Justice is blind
Yeah and white too
Justice is blind
The way she acts she gotta be
The man is jive
Not too jive to have his game
Uptight in your kinky bean

Stand tall Sweetback he
Aint gonna let you
I'm standing tall anyway
The man know everything Sweetback
The man know everything
Then he ought to know Im
Tired of him fuckin with me

Use your feet baby
Run motherfucka
Run Sweetback
He wont bleed me

With regret, we would like to correct a printing error in the centerfold of the last issue of our paper (Vol. VI, No. 20, dated June 12, 1971) in which the author's name of the poem "It's Called Tenth and Greenwich" was deleted. It was written by Melvin Van Peebles.

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

We can see the transformation of the angels if we see the opera in relationship to the scenes in the movie. When he arrives at the desert, the most difficult and lonesome part of his whole trip, the colored angels chastise and vidicule him. They believe, like the gambler, that he is a dead man and it will only be a matter of time until he is caught. So they signify, about how the Man bopped his brother and sister, how he bled his momma and poppa, and how he will get Sweetback. But Sweetback is determined because he knows they won't bop him, they won't bleed him. Why? "I got feet". All he is signifying is that I can deal, and I can survive.

When he uses his urine mixed with mud to make the pack which heals his wounds, the angels begin to change. They see too that he will survive, so they start to become Black. They recognize that they too are like Sweetback, and they point out that they have been treated bad too, but they have been acting like Uncle Toms. Sweetback is going to get his finger on a trigger, get off his knees, and fight a revolution. So when he makes the mudpack, the Black angels begin to tell him to run, they want him to deal, now, they don't want him to Tom. They too have been transformed, because Sweetback has increased their positive qualities by showing them it is not necessary to submit all the time. At some point you have got to get off your knees.

Their transformation continues because when the police looses the hound dogs (slave dogs) after Sweetback and he draws his knife, the Black angels begin to sing "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." This is the first time we have heard this song since Sweetback's baptism into his manhood. The growth he experienced the first time this song was sung, the way he learned from those women in the house of prostitution, is going to serve him again. They gave him love and strength because he was their future, their liberator, and now their training is going to serve him, now that he is older. The angels are transformed, and Sweetback survives. This brings us to the end of the movie, and the negation of the negation. At the beginning the community of oppressed was in contradiction with the oppressors. The oppressed were trying to survive, but the oppressors would not permit that, they wanted more. They wanted to bleed them to death and completely dominate them. They



Niggers got feet

wanted to dominate by dividing the but when we reach that point, we realize community, Sweetback against Moo Moo, Beatle against Sweetback. But this continued oppression led the people to realize that their salvation would only come through unity, and unity would only come through heightened levels of consciousness. So they unify and Sweetback revolts against the oppressors and makes good his escape. Many do not believe he will make it, their consciousness is not as high as his. He is reaching for the stars-making it to the border--but they will only take him to the edge of town.

Sweetback has his high level of consciousness, that is to say, he is a Sweet Sweetback because he has come to understand that freedom, liberation, and the ability to love requires that first of all you have to recapture the holy grail, you have to restore your dignity and manhood by destroying the one who took it from you. When you do that, even if you do not completely escape, you are a dangerous man, because after that the oppressor knows that you will no longer be submissive. Therefore ripping off your oppressor is the first step toward freedom and

This understanding did not come easily to Sweetback. He attempted to look away from Moo Moo, and then after rescuing him, he attempted to make it on his own, only to be misled by Beatle. This put him in the situation of a revolutionary, in the sense that he knew then that he could not find a place of refuge within the system without a whole transformation of the conditions of oppression.

I say this because many people think that revolutionaries are made out of some kinds of abstract predicaments. This is not so, they are transformed by a particular set of situations that are sometimes unique to each individual. What brings one person into his revolutionary consciousness is different from what will bring another,

that we are all unified as victims. That is what happened to Sweetback, Moo Moo, Beatle, the angels and the community in the film. That is why the film stars the Black community-all of us. We must understand our unity and also how we must heighten our consciousness.

So like I said, we have the negation of the negation. The oppressor who wanted to exploit Sweetback and Beatle, ends up beaten by them because they will take his stuff no longer--the negation of the negation. The contradiction between the community, as represented by Sweetback, and the oppressor, as represented by the dogs, has been resolved.

However each synthesis leads to new contradictions. Right until the end Melvin Van Peebles is signifying and conveying a message to us. What is the new contradiction? Sweetback has killed two dogs, but one is still there, refreshing himself in the water mingled with the blood of the other dogs. If Sweetback got two dogs, who is going to get the other? That is the dog we must down. So the movie ends with the words "Watch Out". This has a dual meaning. It is telling all the many Sweetbacks across the land to watch out for that third dog and be prepared to deal when he shows up. It also says to the oppressor to watch out for the Sweetbacks across the land, because they are coming to collect some dues. Righteously signifying.

When Bobby and I started the Black Panther Party, we wanted to build the Black community, the love, the sacredness, and the unity we need so desperately. This is still our goal and we try to help the community survive by administering our many survival programs. Sweet Sweetback helps to put forth the ideas of what we must do to build that community. We need to see it often and learn from it.

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE



Un escrito sobre la maternidad, luego el audiovisual Las Alfareras de Lomas Bajas y finalmente la pelicula Yo, Tú, Ismaelina, son los trabajos en que se fueron concretando búsquedas y discusiones. Si el medio cinematográfico ha sido, por afinidades personales de varios miembros del Grupo, una posibilidad de alguna manera siempre presente, nunca ha llegado a constituir un objetivo en si mismo. Incluso, al decidir hacer la película y luego durante el proceso de realización de los objetivos primordiales han seguido siendo el de mantener el caracter colectivo del trabajo; el de lograr que todas las personas que intervinieran directamente en la realización fueran mujeres; y sobre todo el de transmitir esa correspondencia entre teoría y realidad, reflexión y experiencia, que el Grupo considera fundamental para avanzar en el camino del feminismo.

El descubrimiento de las mujeres alfareras de Lomas Bajas, no fue un descubrimiento folklórico, etnográfico, o siquiera sociológico. Fue el descubrimiento, sólo aparentemente simple, de que las mujeres de todas las condiciones sociales comparten una problemática básica en la que la responsabilidad familiar, el trabajo doméstico y el trabajo productivo, el amor y la transmisión de ideología, conforman a la vez la condena secular de la mujer y el terreno fecundo, cargado de humores vitales y riquezas ocultas, de donde tiene que surgir un ser humano con plenos derechos, seguro, independiente e incluso temerario.

Integrantes del Grupo:

Josefina Acevedo, Cristina Aragona, Mauxi Banchs, Carmen Luisa Cisneros, Franca Donda, Katina Fantini, María Pilar Garcia, Miryam González Blanco, Ambretta Marrosu, Tamara Marrosu, Cathy Racowsky, Christa Sponsel.



CINE CINE CINE CINE

La joven Antuca, quien regresará a su pueblo muy cambiada.



Ultima creación del cine peruano toca drama de los inmigrantes



El equipo productor de "Antuca", a estrenarse pronto.

Fotos Juan Carlos Domínguez

Demostrado está que, la semilla del éxito para los filmes peruanos germina en la identificación del público con los personajes. "Gregorio" y luego "Juliana" lanzaron al celuloide a niños de la calle, con bastante éxito; de ahí que nuestros cineastas se zambullan en las masas para buscar nuevos diamantes que cortar y pulir. Una de ellas es Graciela Huayhua, inmigrante provinciana, quien como muchas- trata de subsistir como empleada del hogar, en una Lima hambrienta

Antuca, una empleada que saltó a la pantalla grande

Graciela Huayhua, en la vida real, es trabajadora del hogar

ria como Delfina Paredes, Eduardo Cesti y Cecilia Tosso, así como Gonzalo Rivera, María Teresa Serra, Eduardo Adrianzén, Pinky Alencastre, María Barca, Mireliz Alva, Cucho Sarmiento, Paloma Valdeavella-

debimos hacer un estudio, grabar un video de diversos testimonios de trabajadoras del hogar, y descubrimos la capacidad expresiva de Graciela. - ¿Quizá fue porque ella atraviesa experiencias similares que Antuca?

Graciela atravesó situaciones similares que en el filme, pero no es una biografía, además el aspecto primordial no es la situación de las trabajadoras del hogar sino la cuestión afectiva, el alejarse de su querencia, de su gente...

- ¿En algún momento pensaron en una actriz procer a una asociación gremial. Al regresar, comprende que ya no es la misma. Lima la cambió. Su antiguo amor es un campesino muy arraigado, dirigente comunal, que no la ve como antes. Sus otroras amigas de infancia le

JUMP CUT

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In this continuous, moving shot, Angel enters center screen and walks down the hallway as the camera pulls back, keeping pace with her movement. At first, she appears somewhat small in the doorway, but her body soon dominates the crowded, narrow space, as she makes her way through the crowd.



Give us our bread and our roses: a materialist trans feminist approach to media

by Nicole Morse

Inside a queer club set in the 1980s, a door opens from the street and a young Black trans woman strides into the shot, moving through a hallway filled with queer and trans people of color. As she walks through the crowd, they wish her luck on her interview for "that modeling campaign." The camera tracks backward, holding her in frame as she walks down the length of the hallway, barely pausing her forward trajectory as she greets friends with a word, a kiss, or a hug. Moments later, she enters a performance space, and the camera turns to keep her in frame as she advances to stand at the beginning of a spot lit runway, poised to walk its length. Amid cuts away to the emcee, the audience, and the other contestants, we see her walk, pose, turn, and pose again. The spotlight crowns her with its illumination as a series of slightly low-angled shots celebrate her beauty and confidence.

These images from Season 2, Episode 3 of the FX television series *Pose* (2018-present, Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals) ensure that we see Angel—the future model and current rising star of the ballroom scene—as photogenic, gorgeous, and already successful within a community that both imagines alternatives to dominant values and is simultaneously a site of continuous struggle, conflict, and negotiation with those values.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Crucially, this scene is juxtaposed with her modeling audition scene, illuminating the distinctions and connections between these spaces and communities. Written by white trans writer Our Lady J and directed by Black trans writer and producer Janet Mock, this episode follows Black trans actor Indya Moore's character Angel just as she is at the point of breaking into the modeling industry. Praised and celebrated by her friends and chosen family, she's about to finally get the life she's always wanted. An outsider, she seems poised to enter into the economic and social structures that have excluded her.

What might a Marxist analysis make of this scene, especially given that this example of trans cultural production is produced by giants of the entertainment industry and explores topics that might seem to be strongly associated with capitalism, like beauty, ambition, belonging (within hegemony), and socially-sanctioned triumph? Based on common (mis)interpretations of trans cultural production that appear in classroom discussions, casual conversations with colleagues, comments overheard at conferences, and online debates about the perils of assimilationism in trans representation, there seems to be an easy answer to that question. Trans issues are a question of identity politics, and are not only separate from but even opposed to Marxist political struggle.[2] From such a position, the show inadvertently reveals that Angel and her community are misidentifying and misunderstanding their situation and are complicit with the





In the ballroom, the lighting shifts to cooler tones with more intense contrasts. Angel poses, her jacket casually draped over her shoulder while the spotlight serves as a diffuse, glamorous backlight. Then—as she turns, poses, tosses away her jacket, and poses again—the camera moves back to show her framed by the dramatically clear lines of the cone of light cast by the spotlight.







racialized, gendered, and cissexist capitalistic values that actually oppress them. But such an interpretation remains incomplete and unsatisfying as it attends only to the surface content of the scene, and not to its formal and affective registers.

In this essay, I use *Pose* as a case study to examine two competing Marxist approaches to the analysis of trans cultural production. First, I discuss the problems with what I'll describe as a "capitalist complicity" approach, which I contend is a reductive understanding of the process of participation in (and resistance to) capitalism. Then, I argue for the advantages of a Marxist approach inspired by materialist trans feminism, which considers how trans and queer communities understand, negotiate, and describe the material conditions they confront within capitalism. I contend that a capitalist complicity approach fails to offer productive anti-capitalist insights even though it is a common way for leftist critics to interpret trans cultural production. Instead, I draw on queer of color critique and on Jody Rosenberg's description of "Transgender Marxism" as a dialectical lesson in how "life is both made and makes other lives possible"[3] to argue that a materialist trans feminist approach that is based in formal analysis allows critics to collaborate with trans artists and creators in envisioning liberatory potentialities.

A capitalist complicity analysis of the scene I described from *Pose* might focus on how Angel's desires and ambitions—as well as her ability to be read as cisgender are shaped by and reinforce the harmful social structures of white supremacist, hetero- and cis-sexist capitalism. It might also regard the entire setting of the scene as further proof of capitalist complicity since the ballroom community devotes so much time and effort to imitating the culture and fashion of the powerful. That analysis isn't entirely wrong. However, not only does it misunderstand how cultural production emerges from dialectical struggle, but it also presents trans and queer subjects narrowly, and neglects their ability to understand, assess, and transform their material conditions. As Marlon Bailey's research on ballroom culture in Detroit demonstrates, community members are not actually reiterating dominant social scripts, but instead are constructing new kinship models through cultural production that supports and sustains their countercultural existence. [4] Of course, Pose is fictional, and in many ways it does represent the trend that Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rouke identify when they describe how trans lives are increasingly packaged by popular media in order to interpellate trans people as "properly subjectified market citizens." [5] Yet such an interpretation of *Pose* only attends to some elements of what Stuart Hall would call the dominant reading of the show; it also overlooks aspects of the dominant message while simultaneously neglecting to imagine how spectators might engage with this text more complexly.

By contrast, a materialist trans feminist analysis can illuminate the stakes of ballroom culture's countercultural intervention into hegemony, since it emphasizes societal transformation through coalitional politics among those most marginalized by late capitalism: trans people, people with disabilities, people who are incarcerated, survivors of sexual violence, those engaged in anti-colonial struggle, and others. [6] Attuned to material conditions, materialist trans feminism is also necessarily intersectional and thus closely tied to queer of color critiques of capitalism. Similarly capacious, trans cultural production involves cultural work by trans people in an incredibly wide variety of media and has a long history of radical, leftist critique. [7] Yet instead of looking for the ways that trans and queer subjects might be navigating and surviving the conditions they face, the capitalist complicity approach assumes too quickly that trans and queer subjects who engage with the world *as it is* are fooled by capitalism. At its extreme, the capitalist complicity approach resembles the transphobic position

Angel walks the length of the spot lit floor toward the judges, with lens flares and other lighting effects continuing to highlight her glamor amid intercut shots of the cheering crowd. As she poses and turns in time to the pulsing music, her scores are announced, and her joyous triumph is palpable.



This poster pairs a protest scene, complete with the slogan on a banner, with a fantastical city scape spilling over with roses underneath a starry sky that is created out of a trans figure's hair. It was created for Transgender Day of Remembrance in 2015 by B. Parker for BreakOUT!, an organization based in New Orleans that works to end the criminalization of LGBTQ youth (https://www.youthbreakout.org).

that trans cultural production—and the very existence of trans people—is deeply and uniquely complicit with capitalism.[8]

Pose stages a desire for success, beauty, and power by constructing situations that demonstrate how complicated both power and desire can be. In the scene I describe above, Angel longs to have her beauty recognized by the outside world in the same way that it is embraced by her community, and her friends and chosen family are simultaneously proud and envious of her. The capitalist complicity approach can't fully account for the scene's complex expression of desire, longing, and envy, but a materialist trans feminist approach can examine the feelings felt by the characters within the fiction and analyze how they are communicated to the viewers through formal filmmaking strategies. Form is crucial to my materialist trans feminist analysis, since form itself is how our embodied experiences of media are produced. Additionally, form offers a vital way to engage with trans cultural production in the digital era, since both trans people and digital media are inaccurately imagined as exemplars of late capitalism's mythicization of fluidity, flexibility, and frictionless interchangeability.[9] As Nathaniel Dickson writes, just as art problematizes "the seeming naturalness of things" through its form, gender transition troubles many of the processes of social reproduction that must be naturalized in order to sustain capitalism.[10]

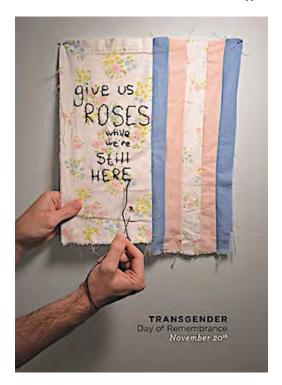
Gender transition destabilizes capitalist social reproduction not just *despite* but *because of* the demand that it makes for access to resources in the name of human flourishing, joy, and pleasure.[11] This "hunger" for what others have and for what trans people are denied is seen as counter-revolutionary by a left that neglects physicality and embodiment,[12] but its particularity and its insistence on access to what makes life livable is profoundly intertwined with Marxist politics.[13] As Carolyn Kay Steedman argues, the "structure of feeling" of envy (of the rich and powerful, or of those in closer proximity to power) is a form of feminist class consciousness, yet its power is all too often dismissed.[14] Steedman writes that only

"by allowing this envy entry into political understanding" can "the proper struggles of people in a state of dispossession to gain their inheritance ... be seen not as sordid and mindless greed for the things of the market place [sic], but attempts to alter a world that has produced in them states of unfulfilled desire." [15]

In other words, the envious desire felt by the oppressed for what the powerful have does not merely reinforce the existing power structures. Instead, it produces an affective friction that strips away the seeming naturalness or rightness of that power. It exposes the cruelty of the system and gives voice to the demand for change.

Keeping this in mind, a materialist trans feminist analysis of the scene might acknowledge that Angel's pursuit of a modeling career is one of the few possibilities available to her if she wants to leave behind risky survival sex work, and it could attend to the way Angel and her community understand their conditions, their oppression, and their opportunities. In this reading, the pageantry of the balls is not merely complicity with capitalism but is instead a form of class consciousness. Producing a counterculture that pursues beauty and success, this scene can be read as an invitation to imagine what kind of world is possible if pleasure, joy, and luxury aren't necessarily the property of the bourgeoisie. As suffragist Helen Todd wrote in 1911,

"there will be no prisons, no scaffolds, no children in factories, no girls driven on the street to earn their bread, in the day when there shall be 'Bread for all, and roses too." [16]



Created in 2019 for Transgender Day of Remembrance by Tumblr user AnnieStrongArt (https://anniestrongart.tumblr.com/post/153400178356), this image combines the trans pride flag with a panel of floral embroidery featuring the slogan. A hand reaches into the frame, caught in mid-stitch, conveying the ongoing demand, the work yet to be done, and the opportunity to take action



Today, protest art by contemporary trans activists responds to murders of trans people, especially Black trans women, by demanding, in the words of artist and activist Wriply Bennet, that the public "give us our roses while we are alive." [17] Cultural production itself is one of the "roses" to which all are proposed to be entitled, and trans cultural production shows us how desire for these "roses" can be understood as a critique of *what is* in the name of *what could be*.

As Sam Feder's Disclosure (2020) examines, trans cultural producers are active in Hollywood but consistently marginalized due to the misperception that there are no trans actors, writers, or directors available to tell trans stories. Pose is featured in Feder's documentary as an example of correcting this tendency, which has long had serious economic consequences for trans cultural workers. The significant contributions that trans cultural workers have made to Pose are important, both from an artistic standpoint and from a labor equity perspective. Yet I focus on Pose not only because of the many trans cultural workers who are critical to its success, [18] but more importantly because of how it revisits and reimagines the documentary Paris is Burning (Jennie Livingston, 1990) from the perspective of trans cultural workers. Directed by a white, cisgender lesbian, Paris is Burning follows Black and Latinx trans and queer ballroom performers in the late eighties and early nineties as they compete in balls. Part of the independent film movement identified by critic B. Ruby Rich as "New Queer Cinema," [19] the documentary was both celebrated and critiqued for its exploration of this particular queer of color subculture. As a result, *Paris is Burning* has been at the heart of debates about the political economics of trans representation, and it has famously been the subject of numerous interpretations that follow what I call the capitalist complicity approach—some of which I will discuss below. These issues emerge again in Pose, which draws on Paris is Burning for its settings, storylines, and even many of its visual motifs. Yet Pose, by contrast, is shaped by trans creators, and this allows *Pose* itself to serve as commentary on *Paris is Burning* some three decades later.

Since its release, some critics of *Paris is Burning* have suggested that its transgender subjects problematically celebrate consumer capitalism and conspicuous consumption. This position is aligned with a more general concern that transgender people are icons of conspicuous consumption under late stage capitalism or enforcers of patriarchy and neoliberalism. [20] More important, it also emerges in historical materialism when dominant ideologies about gender, race, and sexual orientation are treated as natural. As Ferguson notes, this is a position that reiterates Marx's own inability to fully understand how capitalism is racialized and gendered. [21] While this discursive tendency is reductive and has been challenged repeatedly, it often resurfaces in casual conversations about trans cultural production, including classroom discussions of trans media production. There's a discomfort with the idea that gender presentation and access to gender affirming technologies might be a political issue, even among some who consider themselves to be trans allies. Among my colleagues and my students, I notice a lingering assumption that attention to the surface or to appearance is seen as unserious or as disconnected from important political issues. For Julia Serano, this is tied to femmephobia, or cultural discomfort with what is gendered

This poster is for Jacksonville, Florida's 2019
Transgender Day of Resilience/Remembrance,
which was organized by the youth organization
Jasmyn, Jacksonville Transgender Action
Committee, and the University of North Florida's
LGBT Resource Center. The poster features the
slogan on a trans pride flag over a circle of
people holding hands. The figures include a wide
diversity of races, gender expressions, and
embodiments.

feminine—such as beauty, looks, or outward form. [22] While these ideas might not withstand close scrutiny, they persist and deserve to be interrogated. One solution, following Ferguson, is to "disidentify" with historical materialism's silences around race, gender, and sexuality. [23] However, as Gleeson and O'Rourke point out, Marx himself was attuned to "questions of social particularity," and building from such elements in Marx enables them to work toward trans Marxism. [24]





Although the lighting in the 1980s wasn't as elaborate as that depicted in *Pose*, and although the documentary footage of *Paris is Burning* doesn't have the same high resolution or production value as the FX series, sequences like this, which features an unnamed ballroom performer showing off their complex costume against a carefully designed backdrop, are clearly the inspiration for many of the ballroom sequences in *Pose*, including the sequence with Angel that I have analyzed here.

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This intimate interview immediately follows a cinema verité sequence where Livingston, from behind the camera, repeatedly tries to get ball attendees to state that many ballroom performers are sex workers. In this interview, Venus Xtravaganza describes racialized and gendered economic realities of her world, saving: "The thing that helped me make my most money through the escort service is being that I'm so little, I'm so petite, I'm tiny. The blonde hair and the light skin and the green eyes and the little features. The client's hands will be bigger than my hands, while they would hold my hand or something." As she continues, themes of threat and fear emerge in her analysis of her world: "You know, they like feeling that they're with something perfect and little, and not with someone that's bigger than them. Because I guess that kind of disturbs them."

Additionally, after Judith Butler's influential essay "Gender is Burning" linked Paris is Burning to the academic discipline of Queer Theory, the film and its subjects have all too often been conflated with a discipline that is erroneously assumed to be wholly incompatible with Marxist politics.[25] [open endnotes in new window There's an irony here—after all, what the film literally documents are trans and queer ballroom performers stealing high-priced clothing and accessories in order to construct a counterculture that was distinct from the surrounding society—though of course, no counterculture can ever be entirely outside of the culture it opposes. As Ferguson notes, since culture "fosters both identifications and antagonisms, culture becomes a site of material struggle," with the result that queer of color culture is oriented simultaneously toward and against capitalism, producing "unimagined alliances." [26] Furthermore, Marxist thought plays a significant role in queer of color critique, including Chandan Reddy's analysis of Paris is Burning. As Reddy points out, the performers featured in *Paris is Burning* give voice to a critique of the system that excludes them, assessing its inequality and injustice at the same time that they find themselves also interpellated by it.[27] Nonetheless, other critics have described many aspects of the film as indications of capitalist complicity, as I will detail. This ranges from the ballroom practices that the film documents, such as walking categories and striving for "realness," to the content of the intimate interviews where the documentary's subjects express their longing for safety, security, wealth, and belonging.

Filmed during the late 1980s, *Paris is Burning* captures a record of ballroom culture in New York City through direct observational documentary, cinema verité on-the-street conversations, and talking head interviews. Formally, the film invites a number of important critiques. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), bell hooks points out that Livingston herself never appears in the film, obscuring the racialized power dynamics that shape the film's ethnographic gaze. [28] As Jay Prosser notes, the low-budget documentary was made possible in part by the fact that Livingston didn't pay the film's participants for their time, labor, and expertise. In fact, the sequence that discusses Venus Xtravaganza's murder elides that information even as it presents Venus Xtravaganza's death as the inevitable outcome of the extreme precarity and poverty that required her to engage in survival sex work. [29]



Reflected in three different mirrors, Venus Xtravaganza does her hair while a voiceover from Dorian Corey explains the pervasive threat of violence that trans femme people face and how "realness" can be a matter of survival: "When they're



In this sequence, which is shot at night near the piers before Venus Xtravaganza goes on a midnight date with a client, she observes to the camera that her escort work is analogous to the situation of suburban housewives, explaining: "If you're

undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies--those are the femme realest queens."

married, a woman, in a suburb, a regular woman who is married to her husband, and she wants him to buy her a washer and dryer set—in order for him to buy that, I'm sure she'd have to go to bed with him anyway to give him what he wants for her to get what so wants. So, in the long run, it all ends up the same way."





However, most of the discourse about the film isn't about its ethics or the way it mediates the pro-filmic reality it depicts. Instead, perhaps because of its documentary approach, critics focus on the actions and ideas of the people within the film, as if Paris is Burning offered direct and unmediated access to the full reality of these individuals' lives, experiences, and situated knowledge. Furthermore, critics seem to expect a fully formulated, radical political analysis from the film's participants, and they appear disappointed when they encounter casual conversation and joyously messy cultural practices. As a result, ballroom traditions like walking categories, which involve performing stereotypes of white dominant culture, are regarded as wholly uncritical aspirational practices while interview responses that describe a desire for safety and happiness are presented as capitalist capitulation. These reductive ideas have been deconstructed, but many students first encounter the film framed by classic essays by bell hooks and Judith Butler that advance such claims. Although hooks criticizes Livingston's filmmaking decisions, her political critique is also pointedly aimed at the Black queer community, especially trans feminine people, who she collapses into the category of "gay men." She writes:

"much of the tragedy and sadness of this film is evoked by the willingness of black gay men to knock themselves out imitating a ruling-class culture and power elite that is one of the primary agents of the their oppression and exploitation." [30]

Discussing ballroom pageantry, hooks criticizes ballroom performers for upholding white femininity as the ideal, even though she also acknowledges that performers like Dorian Corey voice their own critical analysis of how white femininity is centered—within ballroom culture and within the world at large.[31] Meanwhile, in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), Judith Butler presents Xtravaganza's death as an illustration of the psychoanalytic



This sequence intercuts interview footage of ballroom elders and mothers Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija to describe how the categories arose. In voiceover underneath footage of a ballroom performer in a black and yellow track suit, Corey explains "Everyone couldn't be a Las Vegas showgirl...so they made the categories for everybody."



While getting ready to perform in a drag show professionally, Corey says "I wanted to look like Lena Horne," but notes how ballroom culture—like mainstream culture—idealizes white femininity: "When I grew up, of course you know, black stars were stigmatized. Nobody wanted to look like Lena Horne, everybody wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe."



concept that all subjects are alienated without attending to the specific conditions of violence trans women face.[32] As Mari Ruti writes, such a move is common in queer theory and dangerously confuses a universal "constitutive lack" with contingent and socially-constructed oppression.[33]

To some extent, of course, the documentary subjects of *Paris is Burning* do reinforce hegemonic ideas about "the good life." But obviously, the same criticisms could be made about much of the media and most of the people who exist within white supremacist, heterosexist, cissexist, and patriarchal capitalism. Moreover, as Reddy argues, the subculture documented by *Paris is Burning* doesn't smoothly replicate capitalist ideology; instead, that subculture constructs opportunities for those participating in it to be in conversation with the "contradictory demands and conditions" of the society that has rejected them.[34] Reddy finds political potential in the "confusion" generated by the resulting

"cultural formations that fail to separate cultural productions from material circumstances and political representation, producing powerful confusions of culture, politics, and economic circumstances that engender contradictory subjectivities." [35]

Clearly, these dialectical exchanges are confusing, messy, and certainly not ideologically pure. As Julia Serrano points out, academics tend to expect trans and queer people to articulate a uniquely radical politics, and often appear disappointed when this expectation isn't fulfilled.[36] In particular, academia has long positioned trans feminine people as figures for something other than themselves, as Emma Heaney argues in her analysis of the "trans feminine allegory" in fields including queer theory.[37] But these academic approaches aren't sufficiently attentive to the specificity of trans subjects' experiences.

Through examining trans people's lived experiences, it becomes possible to understand how trans subjects are creative and knowledgeable political actors who are aware of the material conditions that shape their lives—and their practices of survival and resistance. Analyzing Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989), another New Queer Cinema documentary which represents Black drag culture, Ferguson attends closely to the physical movement and gesture of a Black drag queen, writing that we can see in her way of being a "hint of pleasure and alrightness" that produces "a critique of commonplace interpretations of her life." In this reading, she is neither wholly subsumed into "a tangle of pathologies and misfortunes" nor duped by the society that oppresses her, for Ferguson demonstrates that the scene conveys her knowledge of her conditions, including the source of her oppression—which is systemic.[38]

Along similar lines, Steedman provides a way to analyze the political implications of statements that are not necessarily intended to articulate a coherent political program, but which implicitly illuminate the oppressive conditions that the speaker experiences. In Steedman's work, the point is not to conduct a political critique of the individual expressing longing, especially for seemingly frivolous and femininized things like fashionable clothing. Instead, these statements illuminate material conditions, and allow scholars to interrogate "the structures of political thought that have labelled this wanting as wrong." [39] Steedman argues that political analysis too often neglects the economic and social significance of fashion, framing it as trivial. Yet impoverished subjects, especially women and those who are feminine, recognize its material importance, including how clothing



As she interviews for the "Fresh Faces of 1990" modeling campaign, the closeups of Angel emphasize her status as an applicant/supplicant and create a sense of distance because they only give us access to her through the intermediary of the video camera footage. This film-within-a-film constrains her, and her discomfort in this strange situation is apparent. By contrast, the woman she is addressing is represented directly and is clearly quite comfortable in the environment and the conversation. The alteration between 4:3 and 16:9 visually punctuates each cut between the two characters during the interview.







After her win, Angel spins in the spotlight, as the scene shifts into slow motion. Amid lens flares and glittering ticker tape, she celebrates with her friends and chosen family. The camera appears to join the crowd, as she looks toward the lens covering her face in a moment of self-conscious delight.

can be a tool for those who are oppressed as they manage their actual conditions and try to survive.[40]

It's here that I want to return to the scene from *Pose* of Angel at the ball. She's walking the category "femme queen runway," which describes a fantasy life that is perhaps within her grasp, after the audition she just completed with a modeling agency. Crucially, however, the audition itself is shot quite differently from Angel's ballroom performance, and this contrast contributes to my materialist trans feminist reading of the ballroom scene. In the interview, the close-ups of Angel primarily show her as if through a video camera. The image is 4:3, lowresolution, time-stamped with the date, and it emphasizes that Angel is in a position of supplication here, appealing to the powerful. The reverse shots of the head of the modeling agency are 16:9 and high resolution, conveying the beauty, sophistication, and polish of the world that Angel desires to enter. These formal choices shape the scene, which immediately precedes Angel's triumph at the ball. Instead of reading Angel's performance at the ball as her attempt to enter the fashion industry and to participate in modeling's problematic structures, the episode makes the distinctions between the ball and the audition quite clear. One is a necessary hurdle where Angel must ask to be allowed into a career that would enable her to support herself and her chosen family. The other is a space of community, celebration, performance, glitter, competition, conflict, and love that stages the power and the peril of white supremacist capitalism in the name of something else.

Although Steedman is discussing working-class British women in the midtwentieth century, her description of how a politics of envy can mobilize a political relationship to stereotypes and ideals could easily apply to the ballrooms of 1980s New York City when she writes:

"with what creativity people may use the stuff of cultural and social stereotype, so that it becomes not a series of labels applied from outside a situation, but a set of metaphors ready for transformation by those who are its subjects." [41]

In the ballroom scene, white supremacist, patriarchal, hetero- and cis-sexist capitalism is not absent, but the violence of its standards, barriers, and boundaries are being worked on and worked over to produce a space that contributes to trans and queer survival. As the scene shifts into slow motion, and the triumphant Angel spins in the spotlight, with glittering tickertape floating around her, we see the worldbuilding potential of queer performance spaces—alternative worlds that we can glimpse in such moments of celebration and joy. [42]

Across the remainder of the series (to date), the contrast between the ballroom world and the modeling world continues to be starkly marked, both in the image and in the narrative. Repeatedly, Angel faces the reality of her marginalization, exclusion, and objectification amid her commercial success. *Pose* juxtaposes these challenges with the distinct interpersonal challenges of ballroom culture, demonstrating Reddy's argument that one world cannot be reduced to a mere imitation of—or capitulation to—the other. Similar dynamics emerge in other characters' storylines. These juxtapositions work to reveal the horrors of the white supremacist, capitalist system. They are able to do so through representing the violence within dominant culture, rather than by presenting dominant culture through its own mythologization of itself.

Reading *Pose* as a commentary on *Paris is Burning* draws attention to how the earlier documentary juxtaposed scenes of the balls against shots of white, straight,

cisgender people walking down the street, capturing dominant culture only in its most acceptable self-presentation. Rather than exposing its horrors, the rhetorical point is merely to suggest that these "normal" people are also performing their identities. Although this is an important insight into the performativity of identity, the formal effect of juxtaposition ultimately centers the dominant culture because it avoids revealing the violence that sustains hegemonic society when it presents the counterculture as a mere facsimile of it—useful only to produce a rhetorical effect. As a result, this universalizing gesture positions the balls as an example of a general condition rather than as a countercultural tactic for surviving and thriving.









Paris is Burning contrasts these images with the ballroom sequences to reveal that white, wealthy people also must work hard to approximate socially constructed "categories." Almost comical in their banality, the carefully chosen street scenes of normative society affirm the keen social analysis that ballroom performers produce through constructing, performing, and evaluating the categories.

This, ultimately, is the real risk of the capitalist complicity approach: it flattens the distinctions between what *power* expresses and the way oppressed people express *their oppression by power*. While I have examined only a few minutes of *Pose* in detail, I hope that I have demonstrated how a materialist trans feminist approach to trans cultural production opens up crucial questions that are foreclosed by the capitalist complicity approach. In the end, expressions of desire, longing, and envy point to the problem—not the solution. They articulate the lived experiences, material conditions, and class consciousness of those exploited and excluded from the beauty, success, pleasure, and luxury they see around them. Through responding to their critique of what is, we can begin to imagine that, as the protest chant tells us, "another world is possible."



As ballroom performer Willi Ninja explains vogue in voiceover, this sequence shows him transforming a park into a queer performance space, as he poses and vogues while backlit by the golden afternoon light.

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Notes

- 1. Jules Joanne Gleeson, "How Do Gender Transitions Happen?" in *Trangender Marxism*, edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (London: Pluto Books, 2021), 82. [return to page 1]
- 2. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rouke, "Introduction," in *Transgender Marxism*, 3.
- 3. Jody Rosenberg, "Afterword: One Utopia, One Dystopia," in *Transgender Marxism*, 265.
- 4. Marlon Murtha Bailey, "The Labor of Diaspora: Ballroom Culture and the Making of a Black Queer Community," Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 2005). https://go.openathens.net/redirector/fau.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/labor-diaspora-ballroom-culture-making-black/docview/305031111/se-2?accountid=10902.
- 5. Gleeson and O'Rouke, "Introduction," in Transgender Marxism, 14.
- 6. Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Northwestern University Press, 2017), 276-77.
- 7. For more on trans cultural production, see *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility,* edited by Reina Gossett (now Tourmaline), Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
- 8. As Jack Halberstam describes, the transgender body has emerged as a site onto which postmodern fantasies of flexibility are projected, while simultaneously, this dream of flexibility and fluidity supports the structures of late capitalism ($In\ A$ $Queer\ Time\ and\ Place:\ Transgender\ Bodies,\ Subcultural\ Lives\ [New\ York:\ NYU\ Press,\ 2005],\ 18-19).$
- 9. Nicole Erin Morse, *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 11.
- 10. Nathaniel Dickson, "Seizing the Means: Towards a Trans Epistemology," in *Transgender Marxism*, 206.
- 11. Michelle O'Brien, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom," in *Transgender Marxism*, 60.
- 12. Gleeson and O'Rourke, "Introduction," in Transgender Marxism, 9.
- 13. Kate Doyle Griffiths, "Queer Workersim Against Work: Strategising Transgender Labourers, Social Reproduction & Class Formation," in *Transgender Marxism*, 1140.
- 14. Carolyn Kay Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives

- (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 7.
- 15. Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman, 123.
- 16. Helen M. Todd, "Getting out the Vote," *The American Magazine* 72 (1911): 619.
- 17. Katie Tandy, "Trans Day Of Remembrance Is Resilience Above All," *Medium.com*, November 20, 2015, https://medium.com/the-establishment/trans-day-of-remembrance-is-resilience-above-all-2e542fd6b147.
- 18. Alexandra Pollard, "*Pose*: With the largest cast of trans actors in TV history, Ryan Murphy's ballroom drama is a strut in the right direction," *Independent*, March 21, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/pose-film-review-ryan-murphy-ballroom-drama-movie-video-a8829691.html; Tracy E. Gilchrist, "*Pose* Hits Its Highest Ratings and Lands Early Third Season Renewal," *The Advocate*, June 17, 2019, https://www.advocate.com/television/2019/6/17/pose-hits-its-highest-ratings-and-lands-early-third-season-renewal.
- 19. New Queer Cinema is a brief yet significant movement within arthouse cinema, and was identified as such primarily by B. Ruby Rich, writing reviews of film festivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s (New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013]). Rich noticed a new wave of queer authored cinema that countered mainstream representations of queer people with nuanced, complex, and even disturbing fiction films and documentaries. *Paris is Burning* is one of the better known documentaries from the movement.
- 20. Sheila Jeffrey's 2014 book *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (New York: Routeldge, 2014) is one key example of the continued argument that transgender people who seek transition-related medical care are either victims of false consciousness or actively complicit with a capitalist, patriarchal medical industrial complex that creates "transgenderism" to undermine women in the search for profit.
- 21. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 5, 10.
- 22. Julia Serano, Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity (Seal Press, 2007).
- 23. Ferguson, Aberrations in Black, 5-6.
- 24. Gleeson and O'Rourke, "Introduction," in Transgender Marxism, 4-5.
- 25. Some of these critiques astutely highlight the emphasis on individual identity and agency within queer theory (Yola Kipcak, "Marxism vs. Queer Theory," *In Defence of Marxism*, December 2, 2019, https://www.marxist.com/marxism-vs-queer-theory.htm) while others suggest, absurdly, that questioning the sex/gender binary will lead to dissolving all forms of oppositional politics, including class analysis (Slavoj Žižek, "The Sexual is Political," "The Philosophical Salon" in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 1, 2016, https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/the-sexual-is-political). [return to page 2]
- 26. Ferguson, Aberrations in Black, 3.
- 27. Chandan C. Reddy, "Home, Houses, Nonidentity: *Paris is Burning*," in *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*, edited by Rosemary Marangoly George (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 356.

- 28. bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 151.
- 29. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 53-54.
- 30. hooks, "Is Paris Burning?" 150.
- 31. hooks, "Is Paris Burning?" 148-49.
- 32. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, [1993] 2015), 131. Ki Namaste critiques Butler's analysis in "'Tragic Misreadings':Queer Theory's Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity," in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, edited by Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 183-203.
- 33. Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 65.
- 34. Reddy, "Home, Houses, Nonidentity," 357.
- 35. Reddy, "Home, Houses, Nonidentity," 368.
- 36. Serano, "Ungendering in Art and Academia," in Whipping Girl, 195-212.
- 37. Heaney, The New Woman, 203-52.
- 38. Ferguson, Aberrations in Black, 1.
- 39. Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman, 23.
- 40. Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman, 89.
- 41. Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman, 103.
- 42. For more on the worldbuilding possibilities of queer performance spaces, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

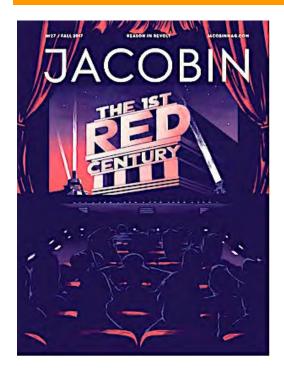
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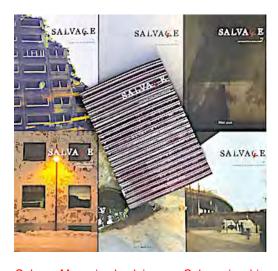
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Jacobin Magazine cover, Fall 2017. Jacobin was founded in 2010 by Bhaskar Sunkara, then a college sophomore, and now reaches an estimated 75,000 monthly print subscribers thanks to the rise in popularity of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) during the mid-2010s and Bernie Sanders' two presidential runs in 2016 and 2020, respectively.



Salvage Magazine back issues. Salvage is a biannual Marxist journal founded in 2015 and published in London. While much of Jacobin's online presence has been addressed to a popular audience interested in the politics of the

Whatever happened to Marxist film theory?

review by Matthew Ellis

Mike Wayne, *Marxism Goes to the Movies* (New York, Routledge: 2000. \$44.95, paper; \$40.45, e-book. ISBN 9781138677876. 228 Pages

Anna Kornbluh, *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club*. New York, Bloomsbury: 2019. \$20.65, paper; \$16.52, e-book. ISBN 9781501347306.

By now it is all but passé to note there has been something like a return to Marx in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. New periodicals with an explicitly socialist editorial line have popped up on either side of the Atlantic, staffed by Millennials saddled with student loan debt and a general antipathy towards the promises of the End of History capitalism they were born into. Anti-capitalist social movements from Occupy to Black Lives Matter have emerged alongside the surprisingly popular electoral campaigns of Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, all of which were described in the bourgeois press as either disorganized tantrums or orchestrated plans to roll out the guillotines depending on how best to stop them at any given moment.[1] [open endnotes in new window During this time, the currency of many social media networks began to revolve around popularized sentiments straight out of Marx's Grundrisse, or in a particularly Twitterfied form, memes imagining a "Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism" culled from Marxist science fiction literature and the work of Aaron Bastani.[2] There seems to be a real growing dissatisfaction with the status quo on behalf of a generation of young leftists without a living memory of the Cold War—a break from what Mark Fisher saw as a "capitalist realism" organizing the entire horizon of the thinkable in a generation who had known no other alternative.[3] Ideas which had a mere decade earlier been relegated as extreme now have the currency of celebrity. Marx is not only no longer an unsayable name —he is *cool* again.

In recognition of this renewed engagement with Marx, Mike Wayne and Anna Kornbluh offer two books that begin from the prescient realization that one might no longer need to argue why reading or historicizing with Marx is important. Wayne's *Marxism Goes to the Movies* (London: Routledge, 2020) and Kornbluh's *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) both return us analytical frameworks that had been declared long obsolete during the 1990s, when communism was on the retreat worldwide, and dreams of a digital utopia for the global spread of liberal democracy seemed unstoppable—even to critics on the left. Wayne and Kornbluh's accessible primers on Marxist film theory are written with educators of film and media studies in mind in this moment. This is all the more important so as to ensure the next wave of Marxist thought does not run into two of the constitutive problems we faced in the 2010s: a lack of *popular* historical and economic education of and within the sphere of

Sanders and Corbyn campaigns, *Salvage*'s editorial line is one that seeks to be "(i)ntellectual and committed without being academic, dogmatic, or philistine" (photo from *Salvage*'s facebook page)



"Hey Pig" by Wren McDonald, found on "Left-Wing Memes for Redistribution" Facebook group. Artists such as McDonald have had their art "memed" by various left-leaning internet communities during the late 2010s. https://www.instagram.com/wrenmcdonald/?hl=en



One further such meme, a tweet referencing Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* manifesto, memeified as a play on Threadless t-shirt's "Communist Party" shirt. Found on Twitter..

cultural production, and careful attention to the methods of reading outlined within the Marxist tradition.

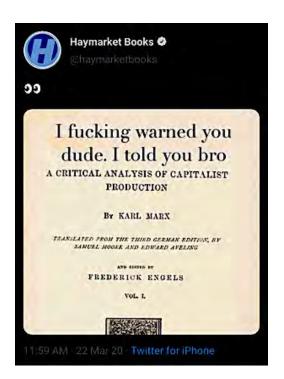
Wayne and Kornbluh offer what I might argue are two distinct yet necessarily complementary methods for incorporating explicitly Marxist analyses into a film and media studies curriculum. Wayne pays careful attention to the history of twentieth-century Marxist thought and its entanglements with the field of film and media studies, as well as the need to understand the distribution of power and labor within the media industries that are increasingly consolidating back into a monopoly stage of capitalist organization. Kornbluh reasserts the necessity of ideology critique and the symptomatic reading of popular culture at a time when capitalists themselves are appropriating calls for racial and sexual justice in their marketing strategies. Both texts are addressed to these respective problems through their organization. Wayne offers a chapter-by-chapter conceptual breakdown useful for a survey course; Kornbluh provides an exemplary close reading of a particular film (*Fight Club*) suited well to a course more focused on textual analysis.

What Wayne and Kornbluh both understand is that this return to Marxism within our current moment provides scholars with an opportunity to revisit the question of what happened to Marxist film theory. This is a chance not merely to engage in debates for the already initiated (or the always already skeptical) in academic journals, but for new readers hungry for tools to interrogate an unfolding present. Just as Kornbluh points to Marxism's "insistence that philosophy is always invested in its own social situation," these texts crucially situate themselves within our own present, offering overlapping yet at times contrasting genealogies of the history and development of Marxist film theory in an attempt to situate how it might be put to use in film and media studies moving forward (Kornbluh 1). And yet, as we will come to see, these genealogies amount to two distinctly different stories about Marxist film theory, what happened to it in the academy, where and how it went wrong (or was wronged), and what remains its potential for our political, historical, and intellectual present.

In what follows, I will outline the distinction between Wayne and Kornbluh's historical accounts while asking how we might place their *own* work within the history of Marxist film theory. I then turn to a brief reading of the role of aesthetic and formal analysis utilized by each text. If one can suggest the legacy of Marxist film theory offers emancipatory potential for analyzing not only popular cinema but new media platforms such as TikTok, the question of what happened to Marxist film theory is just as salient as the question of what Marxist film theory can actually *do* in 2022. But it is this latter question, I argue, that is ultimately the most important for thinking through how one might use these two texts moving forward . And addressing this question demands not so much a doctrinaire commitment to this or that Marxist tendency, but rather the care to note the way our present is shaped by the past and our conceptions of it.

The books

Organized thematically (and somewhat chronologically), Mike Wayne's *Marxism Goes to the Movies* is structured through eight chapters focusing on different aspects of how one might begin thinking through and alongside the Marxist tradition. This schema, I imagine, would be quite useful for students awash in what otherwise might appear to be two hundred years of abstract arguments. Beginning with a chapter on Marx and the dialectical method (1), Wayne then recounts the history of canonical Marxist entanglements with film and media studies in the twentieth (2) before moving to a chapter on methodology (3) which travels out of the Western Marxist tradition into a call for the importance of political economy alongside the legacy of Cultural Studies in the British tradition.



Haymarket Books' Twitter account reposting a meme that retitles *Capital: Volume One* for post-2008 financial turmoil. This particular meme found salience online following the 2008 financial crisis and again in 2020 during the COVID-19 global recession.

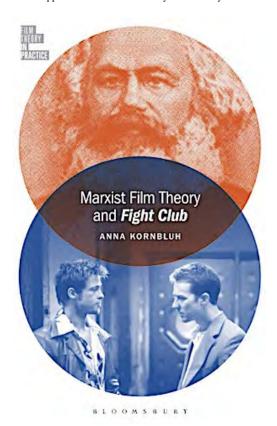
Throughout the remaining chapters, Production (4), Form (5), Ideology (6), Realism (7), and finally Culture (8), Wayne peppers his text with brief readings and synopses of films to help him articulate, for instance, how *Children of Men* (2006, Alfonso Cuarón), *Atomic Blonde* (2017, David Leitch), and the documentary *Capitalism: A Love Story* (Michael Moore, 2009) operate formally through different "realist" logics despite being quite different films in nearly every regard. This style of analysis seems readily teachable. And while the details can begin to accumulate rapidly even for the already initiated—206 pages of a proposed metahistorical account on method does add up—the text can clearly be chopped up into sections, perhaps week by week, in and out of order to introduce students to the discrete concepts Wayne unpacks.

Much of the story Wayne tells about Marxism and film studies speaks to his grounding within a British Marxist tradition. At times, he goes to great lengths to distinguish himself from what he suggests are the "excesses" of the post-Althusserian theoretical turn. In Wayne's account of the development of Marxist film theory, a clean-ish line can be retroactively drawn from Gramsci through a briefly confused interregnum of psychoanalytically-inflected Marxist theory dominated by Althusser . Marxist theory finally finds stable footing in the late 1970s with the re-emergence of political economy's attention to the material conditions of a film's industrial production, and cultural studies' insistence on centering the study of audience reception versus the 'ideal subject' of theory associated with the journal Screen in the 1970s (Wayne 58-70). Wayne's account of the discipline makes an important intervention in a field that cannot afford to draw lines between Marxist approaches, whether one feels their theoretical abstractions are easily intelligible to the lay reader or the inverse. At a time when corporate monopolies are expanding at a rate not seen in the film industry since the 1930s (or ever), questions of labor and of the creative destruction wrought by the turn to streaming *must* be at the forefront of any Marxist analysis of film and media industries. Wayne's insistence on the explanatory power afforded to Marxist film theory by a return to the economic and material conditions by which films are made is crucial for Marxist film theorists operating today in a moment of industrial transition, financial upheavals, and the increasing precarity of film labor in the global cinema industry.

At times Wayne can lean heavily on a critique of capital-T Theory; arguably, he oversimplifies the way in which theory is not ultimately a mere classroom obfuscation. Theory itself has become something like a mode of cultural capital in parts of the online left—from bot accounts tweeting phrases from canonical texts to the use of social media to self-organize reading groups outside the academy for members of organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America. It seems to me the problem is less Theory itself and more that a belief in Theory's inherently obfuscatory nature. Such a belief is a stumbling block to understanding how young Marxists are using theory to make sense of their changing world either within the academy or without—to say very little of the way in which the popular leftist publishing industry is increasingly staffed by precariously underemployed adjuncts with PhDs who are by nature of necessity bringing their analyses out of the classroom and online. Wayne notes of Althusser that

"Marx's base-superstructure model would alert us to the fact that Marxism's entry into academia would be difficult and problematic" (52-53).

Few would disagree that Althusser offers anything like a ready-to-go method for decoding ideology in dominant cultural (or institutional) practices without the use of heavy-handed jargon. But it seems clear that the larger problem of access has less to do with discourse and more with the commodification of higher education and the marketing of Theory as inherently epiphenomenal. Perhaps this



Anna Kornbluh, *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Clu*b.



"The Narrator" and Marla in the final scene of Fight Club. To Kornbluh, Fight Club's bleak ending—in which two survivors watch an entire city collapse—can be read less as nihilism and more as a generational critique of the increasing instability of consumer society during the End of History 1990s.

institutional approach could tell us a more robust story of the decline of 1970s film theory than one that leans into the nature of its problematic abstraction. [10]

Wayne's institutional approach could also help sidestep a critique of 1970s film theory that has found purchase in some corners of the discipline over the past few decades. One such case can be found in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's edited collection, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), which took as its target the Lacanian film theory of Joan Copjec, among others (footnote to citation: David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eds. *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. Approaches such as these critiqued scholars of 1970s film theory for their elitism and reliance on jargon, for substituting obfuscation for evidence that they often argued could not be found in the films themselves. But to rely on this account for the decline of Marxist film theory since the end of the 1970s (to say little of the incorporation of many theorists into institutionalized film studies departments during the same period) runs the risk of ignoring the widespread intellectual heterogeneity of many of the moment's theorists.

Nevertheless, finding a way to thread the needle between abstraction and materiality remains a worthwhile pursuit. Just as U.S. scholars have found (and will continue to need to find) new strategies for keeping left intellectual traditions alive in spite of red-scare style attacks on the academy, Wayne's account illuminates this story for the survival of Marxist film theory that runs counter to many traditions within the U.S. academy. In this sense, Wayne's account of the Birmingham School's arrival in the history of Marxist film theory suggests a necessary corrective to the excesses of the 1970s moment in this tradition, proposing that the burgeoning Marxist film theorist today must situate its address not merely within the realm of textual analysis, but instead, must be prepared to ask questions about the consequences of corporate reorganization and mergers since the 1980s (60). This, I argue, makes this text an incredibly useful analytic framework for providing students with tools for understanding cinema not merely as just another industry in a media-saturated environment, but rather as a mode of production itself. Cinema needs to be understood through Marxist economics and not as a site for the production of liberal subjectivity which so often leads to the cooptation of empty calls for diversity in front of the camera (and not behind).

In this sense, Wayne's text provides one of the most concise and clear solutions to the problem of historical and economic education for media analysis in the classroom. The text could, I argue, be a welcome addition to the necessary work that film and media educators have in front of us for the next decade.

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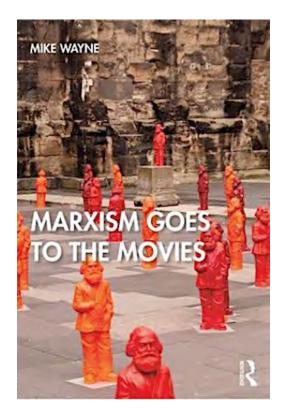
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Mike Wayne, Marxism Goes to the Movies.



Immigrants in cages from *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006). Where Kornbluh focuses her text on a close reading of one film, Wayne moves deftly between textual, industrial, economic, and historical readings of films from Marvel blockbusters to politically-charged art films.

While Wayne's text remains a discretely organized and wide-reaching introduction to the history and contemporaneity of Marxist film theory, Kornbluh's insists on historicizing her own intervention within the history of Marxist film theory. This move, she notes, is central to the philosophical project of Marxism, and it is crucial for turning her book into more than an introductory schema. Rather than trace the history of Marxian film theory leading up to the present moment of publication, Kornbluh notes that her return to the reading practices of U.S. Marxists such as Fredric Jameson stands as an intervention into her (and our) own present. This is the primary way her text begins to solve the problem I outlined in the introduction . She refuses to abandon ideology critique to surface interpretation, and in so doing, she provides a tool not only for university students but for all media consumers to think critically about what texts are doing in a new media environment.

In this way, Kornbluh's Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club not only speaks to the nature of the historical materialist project itself, but also to a specific strategy in the U.S. academy for engaging with Marxism's central ideas today. To teach these ideas as a re-emergent movement requires an attention to the history of Marxist film theory—its decline and contemporary re-emergence—that brings new life to a project long declared dead and over with. It also refuses the fetish of the new that so haunts the field's publishing market. It is not merely by placing our current moment in a genealogy of the development of Marxist film theory, as Wayne does, that we can see how the theorist of today might find it useful. Instead, as Kornbluh notes, the goal is to "(invigorate) both film studies and Marxist film theory" with an awareness that media consumers know all too well when they are in history, and they are thinking of what has happened in the political situation over the past decade. Now it is time to return to questions of critique that parts of the academy have abandoned in order to ask not only how cultural production reproduces the dominant ideology—the concerns of the first wave of ideology critique that failed to transform society—but rather how our abandonment of these questions may have led to the present crisis itself (Kornbluh, 5).

Why must Marxist film theory be invigorated? Kornbluh's Americanist answer is that it was supplanted by new approaches that pushed it to the margins following the 1970s. Here, New Historicism, which emerged out of the work of Michel Foucault, today dominates the field (65). New Historicism, Kornbluh argues, dispelled with the dialectic toward focusing on neoliberal "particularisms" of micro-difference, waves of affect, or rejection of totality (67). Two popular film studies textbooks emerging in the wake of 1970s film theory, she notes, don't even mention Marxism (75). Rather than film studies taking a mere retreat from the pedantic obscurantism of Althusser's interpellation or the identificatory processes that constitute a split subject, Kornbluh notes that the rise of film studies in the U.S. directly echoed new funding policies and institutions emerging with the rise of the public university following the Second World War, making the work of institutional film theory "inseparable from the Cold War, UN soft power, and the new social movements: (77).[5] [open endnotes in new window]

In a way, Kornbluh's approach serves as a rejoinder to Wayne's careful attention to the political economy of the film and media industries by saying: the production of knowledge itself has its own political economy, one that played no less an important role in the creation of the present crisis. Additionally, Kornbluh



Autumn 1972 issue of *Screen*, one of the most influential journals of 1970s Anglophone film theory.







In "Narrative Space," Stephen Heath close reads a famous sequence from the middle of Nagisa Ōshima's *Death by Hanging* (1971) that frames multiple perspectives in contradistinction to both Hollywood narrative space and that of the avantgardes. Philip Rosen has argued Heath's article illustrates the heterogeneous approaches of 1970s film theory, complicating notions that it robbed spectators of agency. Heath argues such an approach is "where it becomes possible to say that the narrative space of film is today not simply a theoretical and practical actuality but is a crucial and political avant-garde problem in a way which offers perspectives on the existing

cogently notes that the rise of "reception-oriented" studies—which emerged in large part out of the Birmingham School during this same period—seems to fit all too comfortably within neoliberal logics of consumer choice, the few exceptions found only in the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall (81). Finally, the dominance of auteur theory—which elevates the genius of the individual over the labor of the collective that goes into producing every film—continues to haunt the halls of the academy (85). Wayne's insistence that this tradition be read into political economy is a useful counterpart to Kornbluh's analysis. These two texts, read in tandem, avoid the pitfalls of post-Marxist approaches over the past decades that were only all too eager to eject a coherent political project.

Wayne and Kornbluh are far from the first to ask what happened to Marxist film theory. While meta-analyses of disciplinary history have long played a crucial role in the intellectual framework of film studies, it is only since the late 1980s that books about the history of film studies itself have come to the forefront. Crucially, the late twentieth century moment for the discipline was haunted by the same then-contemporary specter Jacques Derrida cryptically warned of at a 1993 conference on Marxism following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of state Communism: that of Marxism itself.[6] As the theory wars of Anglophone literary studies in the 1980s played out alongside this very transition into a new geopolitical system, film studies found itself asking many of the same questions over the usefulness of the disciplinary heterogeneity and polemical power of French-inflected Marxist film theory. This moment in the history of film studies might be seen as the last gasp of something like a "collective" Marxist project of film scholarship, uniting disparate theoretical traditions, national and linguistic circles, and level of analysis under what Rosen describes as the post-68

"(desire) for radical political novelty...(corresponding) with a quest for radical transformation among some intellectual sectors" (265).

The story of what happened to Marxist film theory does not begin and end with Soviet montage, the Frankfurt School and other pre-war political modernists, "Western Marxism," "structuralist Marxism," the rise of so-called "poststructuralism" in mid-century France, ideology critique, third cinema and anticolonial film production, or even the rise of the Birmingham School's intellectual relocation into the emerging field of Cultural Studies. One thing does seem inarguable, however, and that is what Kornbluh describes as the decline of even heterodox Marxist film theoretical traditions over this same period in favor of New Historicism, and I would add, cognitive film theory and neo-formalism in the work of David Bordwell and others (Kornbluh 66). As Kornbluh argues, it is perhaps only the work of Fredric Jameson that has managed to avoid the broadscale rejection of Marxist analysis in U.S. film studies. In this sense, for the contemporary Marxist film theorist, it is Jameson's insistence on art's attempt to grasp a Lukácsian totality that marks the decisive return to Marx following what Kornbluh describes as a detour through post-Foucauldian notions of "micropower" that emerge following the failure of 1968's revolutionary upheavals and the subsequent neoliberal turn (Kornbluh 87).

Kornbluh insists that Marxist film theory is not merely an overarching set of methods one can use to talk about the mode of production or cultural reception, but it is instead like a knife that seeks to cut through the epistemological and political strictures that govern the possible of cultural systems. If Wayne ends his account primarily with the legacy of British Cultural Studies, Kornbluh casts her lot with Jameson's dialectical approach, who comes to stand here as "the critic whose work most consistently actualizes the powerful promise of Marxist film theory" (89). But the story, for Kornbluh, doesn't end with Jameson. This is due to Kornbluh's insistence on a specific account of Marxist film theory that draws

terms of that actuality."

attention not just to the ways the 1970s moment failed, but rather the ways in which it was systematically cast aside at the very moment of capital's retrenchment alongside the neoliberal turn in the 1970s and 1980s. In this sense, Jameson's "actualization" of Marxist film theory's promise places the reader not merely in history but rather as the inheritor of a radical tradition which is today beginning to see fresh air for the first time in what seems like decades. The practice of the dialectic, Kornbluh argues, "necessitate(s) taking a stand" (178).

Like the rest of the books in Bloomsbury's *Film Theory in Practice* series, *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club*, as its title shows, does not merely offer an overview of the history of a particular film-theoretical tradition. The insight of the series is to allow each author space to account for their conception of a given theoretical tradition alongside the close reading of one particular film.[7] At the same time, this format alone makes books in this series highly teachable, and Kornbluh's entry is no exception. Her reading of *Fight* Club brings the theory to a single text to illustrate that formal analysis can help interrogate films as systems in and of themselves, produced by, and producing, meaning. Like her insistence on placing her polemic to reinvigorate Marxist film theory within a tradition that has been pushed to the margins, it is precisely the textual evidence displayed by her close reading of a single film that gives her historical argument its weight and its explanatory power for the classroom.

In this way, Kornbluh's text would function well as a particular week's case study in a methods seminar, or as an initial reading for a course or unit dedicated to Marxist film theory as a whole. In either case, the book functions best alongside the film as an exemplary performance of close reading and methodological application, one that could work well in tandem with Wayne's political economic approach. If the problem with Althusser is that he operates too much from the realm of abstraction, as Wayne argues, perhaps this focus on a specific film like Fight Club can both represent the process of, say, interpellation in the film's selfconscious narrative, or, through a close reading of the film and its spectator, illustrate precisely how the process works in many of the ways 1970s film theorists argued. Kornbluh's careful attention to the way form not only conveys content but is itself a product of history allows for the reader to understand that Marxist film theory need not be that which merely concerns itself with any given film's economic incentives or mode of production, but rather a political weapon aimed at unmasking the contradictions of capitalist culture. This distinction, however, allows for each to tell quite different stories about the history and development of Marxist film theory, stories I would like to suggest allow for the articulation of the why now of Marxist film theory while arriving at quite different accounts of the what now, which are directed towards the specific uses and contexts each of these texts might find themselves deployed to address.

By this point, I hope to have made clear that it is not merely enough to ask what happened to Marxist film theory? nor what can Marxist film theory do? Both Marxism Goes to the Movies and Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club are two welcome additions to a corner of the discipline that could, frankly, use more bitesize introductory texts for a generation much more amenable to Marxist thought than in previous decades. However, it is in a return to our present from both these genealogies that I will conclude, urging a bifurcated approach to thinking through the history of the present and the eventual present of the future. How are we, as Marxists, to introduce a new generation of students to this century-old field at the precise moment that interest in socialism is at its greatest peak since the middle of the 20th century, and running the risk of losing that momentum in a wave of disillusionment and cultural exhaustion? How will we tell the history of our present, and what possibilities are engendered or foreclosed for our future when we tell the story of what went wrong in the past? How are we as educators engaging with ideas which are re-emerging in the public sphere while revanchist

state institutions in the United States (and elsewhere) are beginning to once again crack down on pedagogy? These two texts are far from providing the solution, but in understanding precisely what possibilities and dangers lie ahead, might offer models for rebuilding the Marxist cultural project once again.

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Notes

- 1. Following Bernie Sanders' primary victory in Nevada in early 2020, Chris Matthews sarcastically suggested the left might be preparing for public executions in Central Park on MSNBC. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5MRDEXRk4k [return to page 1]
- 2. See: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/cultures/fully-automated-luxury-gay-space-communism
- 3. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books, 2009
- 4. Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," in *Screen* 17, Issue 3, Autumn 1976, pp. 68-112.
- 5. For a similar critique of the U.S. postwar rise of communication studies and its enmeshment with the US security state, see Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017, pp. 243-44, 334. [return to page 2]
- 6. See Jacques Derrida, Spectres of Marx. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012.
- 7. Others in the series look at *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott) through the lens of postmodern theory (Matthew Flisfeder) or *Bamboozled* (2000, Spike Lee) and Critical Race Theory (Alessandra Raengo).

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A pipeline crossing in the US. Photo taken by Hillebrand Steve, US Fish and Wildlife Service (Image from Public Domain Images).



The Hoover Dam on the border of Nevada and Arizona in the US. Photo taken by Kate Headley (2015, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).



Settler infrastructuralisms

review by Jordan Kinder

Review of Rafico Ruiz's *Slow Disturbance: Infrastructural Mediation on the Settler Colonial Resource Frontier.* Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2021. Sign, Storage, Transmission Series. 240 pp.

Infrastructures mediate social and ecological relations. This observation sits at the center of ongoing work in the interdisciplinary confluences that comprise materialist media studies. Materialist media studies names a wide-ranging tendency within contemporary scholarship that emphasizes the unique materialities of specific media-from the storage capacities of hard drives and the energy systems fueling data centers to the ways that the production and distribution of different media are entangled with environmental histories, natural resources, and energy extraction. As Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski write in the introduction to their field-defining collection Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures, a materialist approach to media infrastructures interrupts the fetish of media content by bringing into view the oft-invisible "resources, technologies, labor, and relations that are required to shape, energize, and sustain the distribution" of media across "global, national, and local scales" (5). This focus on media infrastructures has also brought with it efforts to expand notions of what constitutes a medium as such. Numerous critics have argued that we should abandon a narrow conception of media defined in terms of a limited set of sociotechnical forms and objects (e.g., print, film, radio, television, etc.) and instead consider all infrastructures themselves as media. Retrieving the shared etymology of medium and milieu, the infrastructural turn in media studies pushes us to think more capaciously about the very parameters of media.[1] [open endnotes in new window In John Durham Peters's terms, media are thus best understood as "enabling environments" (3) that shape relations between and among humans and the more-than-human world. From the purview of the infrastructural turn, infrastructure troubles any clear distinction between medium and environment, technology and nature.

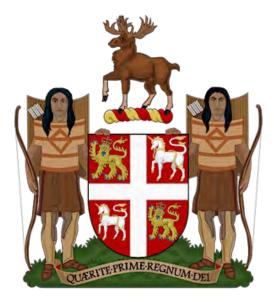
And yet, despite what may seem to be an explosion of interest in infrastructure in our current conjuncture, from another angle it would appear that attention to infrastructure is nothing new. Indeed, questions of infrastructure have long figured prominently in political and theoretical movements both on the ground and on the page. Within movements informed by the Marxist tradition, for instance, the forces and relations of production—often referred to as the base or, sometimes, the *infrastructure*— have been conceived as a premiere site of class antagonism. However, in its analytic trajectories, materialist media studies has at times existed in a fraught or even hostile relation to *historical materialism*. The reasons for this hostility are plenty, tethered as they are to larger conflicts between new and historical materialisms. [3]

These hostilities arguably include a perceived privileging of the human and of economic relations by historical materialism, with the alleged consequence of

Native Nations Rise – Standing with Standing Rock – March on Washington, D.C. Photo by "S L O W K I N G" (2017, Attribution NonCommercial Unported 3.0 license).



Contemporary Official Logo for the Fisherman's Mission (Wikipedia, Fair Use)



Coat of arms of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada.

overemphasizing structural determinations over open-ended processes and underemphasizing the complex agencies of more-than-human actants. However, in the midst of contemporary struggles over extractive capitalism and extractive infrastructure, from pipelines to megadams, the need for a renewed encounter between more specific historical materialist and more general materialist media studies approaches to infrastructure is more urgent than ever. Crucially, such struggles against extractive infrastructure and ecological degradation have been led by Indigenous peoples and, as Indigenous scholars and activists insist, contemporary forms of environmental violence must be understood within the context of historical and ongoing modes of settler-colonial dispossession.[4] How, then, might unearthing the sedimented histories of settler infrastructure allow media critics to better address urgent issues of decolonial, ecological justice today?

Turning to what he frames as a "minor" episode of infrastructural settler-colonial place-making, Rafico Ruiz's Slow Disturbance: Infrastructural Mediation on the Settler Colonial Resource Frontier examines the contours of frontier expansionism and settler community formation in a historic enterprise of Canada's national mythology: the Grenfell Mission. The Grenfell Mission—a branch of Britain's Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen (commonly known as the Fishermen's Mission)—was a philanthropic organization founded in 1892 by English-born medical missionary Sir Wilfred Grenfell. The Grenfell Mission's purpose was to offer medical and social services to the settler communities of northern Newfoundland and Labrador located in what is today known colonially as Atlantic Canada. Incorporated as the International Grenfell Association (IGA) in 1914, the mission managed the region's healthcare until 1981 when it was placed under provincial control. (Newfoundland did not join the Canadian Confederacy until after World War II.) Its legacy carries on today in the name of the Labrador-Grenfell Regional Health Authority, a non-profit organization that "offers funding for community projects and initiatives that serve to enhance the general well being [sic] of the residents" of northern Newfoundland and coastal Labrador ("About IGA").

The Grenfell Mission ultimately played an instrumental, if historically overlooked, role in settler community relations as this fisherfolk community labored in an early wave of resource extraction and exhaustion: the Atlantic cod industry. It is difficult to exaggerate how the cod industry's rise and fall impacted social, economic, and ecological life in Newfoundland and Labrador. For centuries, the cod industry was the economic foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, but overfishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to its virtual extinction in the region. A federal moratorium on the practice in 1992 would cement the industry's collapse and, some thirty years later, it shows little signs of recovery (Smellie).

The cod industry has also been central to the settler-colonial mythologies that underwrite Canadian national identity and, more specifically, to the *staples thesis* that would come to define the study of Canadian political economy. Developed by the Canadian political economist and pioneer of media studies Harold Innis, the staples thesis describes economies that rely primarily on the export of raw materials rather than their manufacture (385). Despite critiquing the staples economy in his analysis, Innis's formulation itself has contributed to a kind of settler-colonial mythmaking by, for instance, overlooking the vibrant, non-capitalist Indigenous economies that exist against and alongside settler colonial, capitalist ones (Pasternak and Scott 207). In tandem with his political-economic writings, Innis helped to establish a prominent tradition of Canadian media and communication studies known as the Toronto School.

While Ruiz's approach to media extends the work of Innis and his fellow-



Sir Wilfred Grenfell pictured on a ship, taken between 1932 and 1937 (PF-372.022, <u>Maritime</u> History Archive).



One of the Grenfell Mission's medical vessel's, the *Strathcona*, taken in 1910 (From Wilfred T. Grenfell, Labrador: The Country and the People [New York: The MacMillan Company, 1910], 246 via <u>Heritage N&L</u>).



The Grenfell Mission's Battle Harbour Hospital in Labrador, built by Grenfell and opened in 1893 (PF-325.098, Maritime History Archive).

travellers, *Slow Disturbance*'s careful attention to the imbrication of the Grenfell Mission's infrastructure with colonial processes marks Ruiz's break with Innis's implicit reification of Canadian settler histories and worldviews. According to Ruiz, the Grenfell Mission was an institution whose Protestant evangelical principles and commitments were expressed and enacted through infrastructure. These principles and commitments performed the work of care and repair for settler communities, which materialized through infrastructural relations including

- the construction of hospitals;
- the establishment of a cooperative financial system;
- the aerial mapping of the northernmost coast of Labrador; and
- the use of film to communicate the mission's legacy in the public imagination.

Through a close examination of these varied practices informed by archival analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, *Slow Disturbance* offers a vocabulary for environmental media studies that synthesizes a number of recent trajectories in materialist media studies. At the same time, it produces a method that tracks the infrastructural undercurrents of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism. What Ruiz thus offers is a longer historical view of extractive capitalism and its entanglements with settler colonial media through a sustained study of the Grenfell Mission and its "minor histories of mediation" (5).

At its core, *Slow Disturbance* presents what Ruiz describes as a "transmedia story" (172) that aims to unsettle "the promises of extraction" (173). In employing the notion of transmedia to describe his archive, Ruiz draws on an expanded conception of media, one which includes not only traditional audiovisual forms (e.g., cinematic storytelling) but also hospital buildings, cooperative finance programs, and aerial mapping techniques. In so doing, he tracks how the Grenfell Mission contributed to settler-colonial placemaking from the 1880s to the 1950s. Proposing a method of "slow historiography," Ruiz suggests that such an approach opens "up possibilities for thinking through the relational emergence between affective settler infrastructure and archival work" (30). Here, "affective settler infrastructure" describes those material, social, and technical systems that provided care, maintenance, and repair to the settler population.

In this essay, I zoom in on a set of key conceptual and historical lines of sight that comprise *Slow Disturbance* in order to clarify some of the book's conceptual building blocks while also detailing its theoretical and methodological contributions. These contributions in particular reveal tensions in the colonial, extractive capitalist world-building that mark the present—that is, a persistence of settler-colonial relations through the building of infrastructure in the face of broken and waning promises of extraction. In exposing these tensions, Ruiz ultimately historicizes the reproduction of settler colonialism through resource extraction and, accordingly, challenges the presentism within many analyses of extractive capitalism today.

Mediation on the resource frontier: navigating settler infrastructuralisms

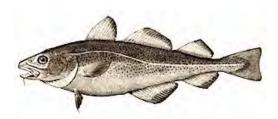
Tracing the life and afterlife of the Grenfell Mission, Ruiz fashions a conceptual anchor to which much of *Slow Disturbance*'s analysis is tied: infrastructural mediation. For Ruiz,



The Grenfell Mission's School at St. Anthony in Newfoundland, opened in 1909 (PF-103.3-C49, Maritime History Archive).



Soft Coral in Bali near Amed. Photo taken by AlexeiAVA (2015, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license).



Atlantic cod (*Gadus morhua*). An altered and prepared plate by Hadal (<u>Public Domain</u>, <u>Wikimedia Commons</u>).

"Infrastructural mediation is a means to examine how colonial lifeworlds, subjectivities, and affects come into being through the design, building, maintenance, and repair of infrastructures that respond to resource frontier-making projects as settler media-making projects as well" (4).

Infrastructural mediation draws on varied understandings of mediation as an active, indeterminate process that shapes relations, and the concept sees in infrastructure the staging ground for this process. But *mediation* is a fraught concept with sometimes competing definitions. Ruiz provides a brief genealogy of resonant and dissonant notions of mediation as they have been employed in media studies by engaging Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska's *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, from which he derives his own concept of mediation. Against what they perceive as a static and more structuralist concept of mediation employed within Marxist tendencies in media studies, Kember and Zylinska develop a vitalist approach inspired by the French philosopher Henri Bergson wherein

"mediation can be seen as another term for 'life,' for being-in and emerging-with the world" (23).

Following Kember and Zylinska, Ruiz posits mediation as a relational, affective, and open-ended process, rather than as an encounter between two already constituted entities (for example, between nature and technology, or between the ocean and the built environment). However, in my view, such vitalist orientations are not necessarily in antagonism with those Marxist approaches to mediation where mediation names a complex social relation and lived process as much as a structure.[5]

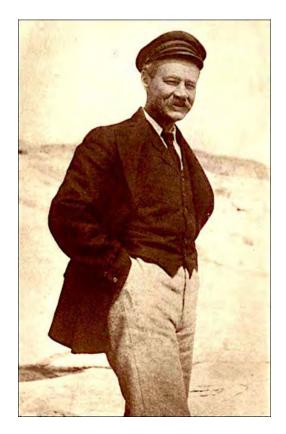
In fact, while Ruiz explicitly invokes Kember and Zylinska's vitalist definition of mediation, his is arguably a mediation that more directly maintains its links to historical materialism. Ruiz's account of mediation remains attuned to economic structures and class relations as much as it does to indeterminate and affective ones. Indeed, within processes of colonial, extractive capitalist world-building, infrastructure emerges as a site where media meet political economy. It is in this meeting of the political-economic and the infrastructural from which Ruiz develops the central concept of *infrastructural mediation* that underwrites *Slow Disturbance*. Infrastructural mediation, then, pinpoints the entangled character of media, labor, and environment—the very processes and relations that constitute a resource frontier. Leaning on pathbreaking media theorists such as Lisa Parks, Nicole Starosielski, and John Durham Peters, Ruiz proposes that we should approach the resource frontier as itself a medium:

"Resource frontiers make this tension between a given environment, mediating processes, and a labouring anthropos apparent; they are, like many media, always in between, relaying, caught in the making" (9).

In short, the resource frontier is a medium that is itself mediated by multiple media infrastructures, from architectural spaces to financial networks to the cinema. To view the resource frontier as a medium and hence as a process, then, helps us understand that settler colonialism and extractive capitalism are never *settled* project. Consequently, this view helps us imagine how the reproduction of these projects might be disrupted. Through this capacious account of media and



Fish drying on flakes in NL, ca. 1920s (PF-325.124, Maritime History Archive).



Wilfred Grenfell, ca. 1910, from Wilfred T. Grenfell, *Down to the Sea* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 184, republished on Heritage Newfoundland & Labrador.

mediation, Ruiz explores how settler colonial and extractive capitalism became sedimented in the built environment. For the Grenfell Mission, infrastructural mediation was thus a specifically settler infrastructural mediation in which the care of some and the dispossession of others were mutually bound through the medium of the resource frontier. As Ruiz highlights, the mission's material interventions in Newfoundland and Labrador intensified settler-colonial processes of dispossession. These forms of dispossession included the displacement of Indigenous peoples through the construction of new buildings, as well as active participation in genocide through the operation of residential schools.

Slow Disturbance's attention to materiality and the built environment allows Ruiz to tell a transmedia story of settler colonialism that moves from hospitals to cooperative finance, from aerial cartographic practice to filmmaking. In each of these cases, the *materials* of the Grenfell Mission take centerstage, serving as the *dramatis personae* of *Slow Disturbance* with as much force as the human actors it portrays. These agents include fisherfolk laborers, merchant capitalists, and the fish themselves—all of whom are entangled in the shadow of Indigenous peoples whose presence haunts the settler-colonial machinations of the mission's enterprise. Since the mission was formed to fulfill roles of care and support on the resource frontier, it participated in ensuring what I would call a kind of *settler social reproduction*.

It sought to offer services of maintenance and repair to settlers who were ultimately neglected by the British Empire at the same time as these people were quite literally feeding the Empire. Constructing both hard and soft infrastructures, the mission performed these services in the shadow of exhaustion and abandonment that far exceeded the capacities of the mission under the weight of capitalism's contradictions. So, while the mission certainly played a central role in the production and reproduction of settler life under extractive capitalism, it did so in a tenuous capacity. The people's fates were sealed by the trials and tribulations of a boom-and-bust economy that, in its final iteration, landed on bust as the cod industry dried up due to cycles of overfishing beginning in the late nineteenth-century. In Ruiz's transmedia story of the Grenfell Mission, the myth of extraction is laid bare as the mission attempted to address the failings of both Empire and extractive capitalism in delivering the good life to a settler population.

Chapter 1 focuses on the Mission's development of medical infrastructure as a means to ensure this reproduction. Because laboring fisherfolk were subject to extreme, harsh conditions at work and home, the mission sought to provide the means of reproduction for these settler communities, given that it was these laborers who were ultimately feeding the British Empire through the cod industry. In Chapter 2, Ruiz moves from his analysis of medical infrastructure to the system of cooperative finance institutionalized by the mission as it established the Red Bay Cooperative and built a cooperative store in 1896. This cooperative formed in the political-economic setting of a transition from merchant to industrial capitalism.

Here, questions of debt sit at the center of Ruiz's treatment of the cooperative,



Doctors and Nurses in Front of the St. Anthony Hospital in 1922 (PF-325.059, Maritime History Archive.

which ultimately sought to create an alternative to the truck system. *Truck systems* are modes of remuneration for laborers where work is paid out in unconventional forms, such as company scrip, and the term "truck" refers to an early use of the word to mean barter or trade. In the case of Newfoundland and Labrador, this system saw workers being paid in goods rather wages or being advanced goods in ways that left them beholden to predatory merchant employers. Grenfell saw the negative impacts of this system firsthand and sought to develop a more equitable financial infrastructure. As Ruiz observes,

"This was part of the mission's projected reforms on these coasts [of northern Newfoundland and Labrador]—to reshape and extend the fisherfolk's extraction-reliant financial lives by educating them through the tenets of cooperative action" (81).

In this chapter and throughout Slow Disturbance, Ruiz intervenes in a historical presentism that often inflects analyses of extractive capitalism. And, as he analyzes the case of the Grenfell Mission's financial infrastructuralism, he does so in an intricate accounting of the cooperative's role in reshaping the economic relations of northern Newfoundland and Labrador. More specifically, Ruiz analyzes how what he calls "debt subjectivities" shaped social and economic relations and how Grenfell sought to reshape the deleterious consequences of the economic order of the day. Deployed in this way, debt subjectivities describe the ways in which debt-whether produced through goods advanced by employers or small receiving loans from merchant capitalists—was a constitutive condition of social relations in Newfoundland and Labrador's staples economy. These subjectivities were tied to the existing labor conditions, where surplus value was extracted from fisherfolk with little regard for their bodily and financial health. Both bodily and financial health, then, were avenues through which the mission pursued its Protestant evangelical infrastructural project of reproducing settler subjects and life-worlds. In this way, the Grenfell Mission served an integral function in maintaining the conditions for the resource frontier to take shape.





Frick Coal Company scrip, ca. 1874, which would be used for purchases at a company store. This kind of arrangement between worker and employer is precisely what Grenfell sought to challenge through the creation of cooperative stores (Wikimedia Commons).

One of the Grenfell Mission's cooperative stores in St. Anthony, Newfoundland, with a banner on its façade reading "Faith Hope and Abide But the Greatest of These is Love." Photo taken between 1932 and 1937 (PF-372.062, Maritime History Archive).

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A facsimile map sketched by Sir Wilfred Grenfell of the coast from Ramah Bay to McLelan Strait, used as for reference in the aerial mapping (<u>Alexander Forbes</u>, <u>Northernmost Labrador mapped from the air</u>, <u>American Geographical Society</u>, <u>1938</u>, <u>p. 13</u>).

Following the medical and financial expressions of the mission's infrastructural mediation, Ruiz turns in Chapter 3 to the technological capacities of the Grenfell Mission, focusing specifically on cartographic practices that enacted infrastructural mediation through territorial means. At the behest of Grenfell, a physiology professor at Harvard Medical School named Alexander Forbes took up the task of leading an aerial expedition to produce a topographic map of the North Coast of Labrador, which would be compiled into the 1938 book *Northernmost Labrador Mapped from the Air*. Ruiz writes,

"The mission's deployment of oblique aerial photography through Grenfell's provision of the initial impetus and logistical support to Forbes's expeditions was part of its practices of infrastructural mediation and one that would be placed at the heart of American military technical life from 1939 onward" (122).

Techniques refined during the Forbes-Grenfell Survey of northernmost Labrador were developed in parallel with techniques employed by the surveyor O.M. Miller in nuclear weapons testing by the US in World War II at Bikini Atoll. Ruiz observes.

"Labrador, far from being a 'useless' territory was an experimental site of geographical knowledge production" (127).



The ship used for part of the mapping expedition, the *Ramah*, anchored at Geology Cove, taken July 17, 1931 (Alexander Forbes, *Northernmost Labrador mapped from the air*, American Geographical Society, 1938, p. 48).



Grenfell's sled dog team in the snow resting, ca. 1922 (PF-325.047, <u>Maritime History Archive</u>).

Such visual knowledge production, like other surveying efforts from Canadian scientific agencies such as Geological Survey of Canada, would transcribe the vibrant contours of the landscape into a format useful for settler-colonial and extractive capitalist pursuits.

Refining cartographic methods in these ways spoke to a technological and representational dimension of the Grenfell Mission's infrastructural mediation. Like aerial mapping, film served as a means to communicate the mission's infrastructuralism:

"Magic lantern slides, photography, and, eventually, film would all come to contribute to relaying the Grenfell Mission story of an outpost made up of needful and worthy Anglo-Saxon settlers feeding the empire" (156-157).

Alongside "the medical, financial, and territorial infrastructures of care and maintenance" at the heart of the mission, the mission produced films that communicated these commitments and expressions.

"For the IGA, the medium of film became the best means of creating a lasting historical record of the mission's activities" (160).

In his turn to the films produced by the mission, Ruiz offers a metacritical reflection that synthesizes the mission's filmic self-presentation. These films are ultimately read by Ruiz as technological and representational expressions of the mission's infrastructuralism. As the final medium that makes up Ruiz transmedia story—and, notably, the most conventional media format he examines—the cinematic efforts of the mission in the form of institutionally-sanctioned films highlight how the mission's legacies have been shaped in profoundly ideological ways. These films served the mission in two primary modes: first, as a way of showing the mission's work to a broader audience on a contemporary tour circuit and, second, as a historical record of the mission's work.

Turning attention to an unedited, unreleased collection of IGA silent film footage of infrastructures and social projects spearheaded the Grenfell Mission housed in the Labrador Institute, a division of Memorial University's Happy Valley-Goose Bay campus, Ruiz details how finished films would circulate to schools, churches,



St. Anthony Harbour filled with ice, ca. 1920s (PF-325.114, Maritime History Archive).

and universities while generating a kind of passing income. Addressing film as a mode of expression in these ways shows that settler stories become sedimented not only in the built environment, but also in how the broader settler cultural memory of the mission itself took shape. In other words, the filmic efforts represented a particular view of the mission that worked in tandem with its material expression through the built environment, all of which undergirded settler social reproduction.

Settler infrastructuralism in the shadow of dispossession and genocide

Closely following the ways that infrastructure mediates settler colonial processes can hazard the reproduction of those same settler-colonial logics and legacies. To avoid such reproduction, Ruiz is careful to include Indigenous voices within *Slow Disturbance* and to underline the decolonial, unsettling potential of telling settler stories *as* settler stories. Ruiz clarifies.

"While I do not lose sight of the extinction of the Beothuk, nor of the progressive colonization and marginalization of Innu, Inuit, Mi'kmaq, and Métis across Newfoundland and Labrador, my aim is to articulate this historical resource frontier as a site of infrastructural mediation directed toward the fisherfolk as a group of settler colonists" (8).

Of course, as Ruiz reminds us through the sage words of the late anthropologist Patrick Wolfe, settler colonialism operates as a "structure not as an event" (388). The infrastructuralism of the Grenfell Mission gave shape to this structure by sustaining it through mechanisms of care, maintenance, and repair.[6] [open endnotes in new window] Yet the violence that underwrites this infrastructuralism haunts *Slow Disturbance*, and in some ways Ruiz's text remains absent of these brutal realities of settler colonialism.

Ruiz's book does, however, contain glimpses of the violence that underwrites settler colonialism and the emergence of extractive capitalism more generally. In the early pages of *Slow Disturbance*, for instance, Ruiz describes the violent displacement and genocide of the Beothuk—an Indigenous peoples in what is now called Newfoundland who are considered by dominant settler history to be extinct—as the boom-and-bust of extraction and exhaustion's condition of possibility:

"The settler fisherfolk, having supplanted the Beothuk by the early nineteenth century through forced expulsions, the transmission of disease, and other means of colonial settlement, were engaged in a mercantile system that privileged the extraction, processing, and distribution of fish" (2-3).

Elsewhere, Ruiz describes the racialized taxonomies and imaginaries through



Inuit with kayaks at Ryan's Bay, taken in 1931 (Alexander Forbes, *Northernmost Labrador mapped from the air*, American Geographical Society, 1938, p. 88).



The Spirit of the Beothuk by George Spires, a statue at Boyd's Cove of Shanawdithit, said to be the last known living member of the Beothuk, who died in 1829 of tuberculosis. (Oh Kaye, Flickr, 2013).

which the Grenfell Mission operated. In short, under settler-colonial extractive capitalism, c are and repair for some manifest as the dispossession, assimilation, or elimination of others. This structural relation of settler social reproduction is a point to which Ruiz returns often throughout the text.

And yet, in the face of Ruiz's accountings of the consequences of infrastructural mediation, the direct role of the Grenfell Mission and the IGA in settler-colonial violence can sometimes seem obscured. The Grenfell Mission's infrastructural mediation was ultimately deleterious to Indigenous peoples, despite, for instance, one of Ruiz's settler interviewees pointing out that "[e]veryone benefited from the mission" (113). In 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made this culpability clear when he apologized to Indigenous survivors of residential schools in Newfoundland and Labrador. Residential schools were an assimilation strategy that forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families to attend the schools. At these schools, children suffered sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, and mass graves continue be uncovered, all of which has been officially described by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada as genocide. As the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's coverage of Trudeau's apology details, the IGA was responsible for running some of the five residential schools between 1949 and 1979 (Bartlett). Although this episode in the IGA's history largely falls out of the bounds of Ruiz's temporal scope, this involvement in the residential school system nevertheless adds another dark layer to the larger picture of the Grenfell Mission's settler-colonial machinations.

In many ways, though, the concrete details of historical and ongoing forms of colonial violence are not Ruiz's stories to tell, and his bookending of *Slow Disturbance* with reference to de- and anti-colonial thought from figures such as Wolfe and Linda Tuhiwai Smith tells us as much as he grapples with the dialectic of settler infrastructuralism and with historical and ongoing modes of dispossession. *Slow Disturbance*, then, remains a settler story, but one which is carefully told for decolonial ends. And this care culminates in a model for doing research that resists the extraction of Indigenous knowledge and experience that occurs when Indigenous knowledge becomes instrumentalized in the academy and beyond. *Slow Disturbance* further challenges the extractive tendencies of scholarly research through its method of slow historiography that emerged from "haphazard fieldwork" that took shape around

"formal interviews and informal conversations with municipal officials, teachers, doctors, fisher people, and all manner of local residents at those socially magnetic Tim Hortons across northern Newfoundland and Labrador" (29).

Many voices from these interviews are interspersed as brief chapters where the interviewees take centerstage as Ruiz's authorial voice temporarily gives up its hold over the narrative. This formal strategy reverberates throughout to create space for those who have intimate experience with and investments in the life and afterlife of the Grenfell Mission.

Coda: from feeding to starving empire

I read Slow Disturbance in early summer heat of 2021 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, a city that sits on unceded land and waters, the caretakers of which are recognized as the Kanien'kehá:ka or Mohawk peoples. Several mutually informing contexts marked this place and time—persistent, record-breaking heat waves took hold over North America's West as wildfires engulfed the landscape, all while the Covid-19 pandemic entered its third wave. Just before I opened the pages of Slow Disturbance came the discovery of 215 bodies of children at an unmarked mass grave on the former grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in socalled British Columbia. Many more discoveries across Canada would follow at other former residential school grounds, and many more will likely follow this. Yet ongoing efforts to disrupt settler infrastructuralism through strategies such as blockade and reclamation persist in inspiring ways. One of these is 1492 Land Back Lane, a Haudenosaunee-led occupation of a housing development site in Caledonia, Ontario on unceded Six Nations territory that began in 2020. In July 2021, the housing development was cancelled in response to the direct action of the 1492 Land Back Lane land defenders.



A school bus blockading Argyle Street in Caledonia as part of the 1492 Land Back Lane reoccupation (Photo from APTN).

Slow Disturbance provides urgent historical resources to refract the activity of Land Back Lane and other contemporary forms of Indigenous resistance to settler colonial infrastructure. The book does this through its attention to the ways that settler histories are sedimented in the built environment and in the cultural-historical narratives that emerge from and alongside such environments. Indeed, the spatial and temporal conditions within which I read Slow Disturbance are important when I consider the contribution that Ruiz's bookmakes as a slow historiography performed with an eye to a decolonial future. The failure of capitalism to deliver on the promises of extraction to the settler community that Slow Disturbance historicizes does important work to reveal the still unsettled projects of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism through infrastructural mediation. Our future, in other words, is not yet determined.

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Notes

- 1. For an account of the "infrastructural turn" in the humanities and social sciences, see the introduction to Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel's 2018 book *The Promise of Infrastructure*. [return to page 1]
- 2. Note omitted.
- 3. It is beyond the scope of this review essay to account for the still-unfolding debates and conversations surrounding new and historical materialisms. For an account critical of new materialism, see Alexander R. Galloway's "History is What Hurts: On Old Materialism." For a generous account, see Charles T. Wolfe's "Materialism New and Old."
- 4. See, for instance, Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen's "Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure" and Anne Spice's "Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations against Pipelines."
- 5. Raymond Williams's entry for mediation in his influential *Keywords: A Vocabulary for Culture and Society* (1985) provides a window into the complexity of its use within and beyond Marxist traditions of thought. Williams describes usage of mediation in three "common, but conflicting" ways: 1) politically, which describes an "intermediary action" that results in the reconciliation of opposing forces or produces agreement; 2) dualistically, which describes an activity that brings into view "a relationship between otherwise separated facts and actions and experience"; and 3) formally, which describes "an activity which directly expresses otherwise unexpressed relations" (206). D eterminism looms over all three of these usages that, in my understanding, Ruiz, following, Kember and Zylinska, hopes to trouble with vitalist orientations.
- 6. See Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." [return to page 2]

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Poetry from *Endless* futures

review by Nataleah Hunter-Young

Kara Keeling. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019. 273 pg.



Artist Cosima said to Frank Ocean in a 2019 interview, "To a lot of artists who are trapped in deals and contracts you're something of a north star."

Endless was unimaginable to Universal Music Group (UMG). Fans waited four years for Frank Ocean's second studio album, and on August 19, 2016 they got a 46-minute-long, high contrast black and white experimental visual album with an unmarked tracklist. Released exclusively as a video on Apple Music, Endless had no purchase option. It would be the next day when critics got what they were looking for but under the title Blond(e). Another album, this time sixty minutes long with eighteen tracks plus one unlisted, and widely available to stream and buy. The press would learn in the days to come that Endless marked the end of Ocean's contractual obligations to Def Jam Records. Blond(e) was his first official release as an independent artist and ushered in for UMG (Def Jam's parent company) the categorical end to licensing exclusive streaming deals for artists.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

What Ocean had with Def Jam is called a "futures contract." Def Jam (the buyer) believed that the future would confirm the (money) value they would accrue from Ocean's (the seller) second album. The label based their calculations of future earnings on present-day metrics like Ocean's popularity following the release of his mixtape *Nostalgia Ultra*. This is also called "speculation," wherein a certain amount of risk is accepted in purchasing a commodity that one expects will become more profitable in the future. These logics rely on (the presumption of) universal belief in their existence. In other words, before the purchase or exchange of goods, both Def Jam and Ocean ostensibly agreed to believe in the (money) value of what was to come. However, Ocean effectively changed the terms of his contract with the label by *reimagining* that value on his own terms. For Ocean, in the specific case of *Endless*, "value" did not equal million dollar returns for his label or himself.[2] An album was required, and an album—demonetized albeit valuable in other ways—is what Def Jam got.















Multiple Oceans build a staircase to nowhere in his high contrast visual album *Endless* (2016), released exclusively on Apple Music and marking the end of Universal Music Group (UMG) licencing exclusive streaming deals for artists.



I will skip a substantial qualification of the ripples this artistic decision sent through an already fragile industry desperate to maintain a top-heavy finance structure, one long made redundant by the Internet and the mainstreaming of high-quality digital recording equipment. (This is the same industry still haunted by Napster and beside itself in attempts to control the market share lost to burgeoning streaming platforms.) Instead, what I find useful in this example is the errant futurism it flouts in the face of racial capitalism—that is, the example it sets for one's imagination. It is not an end to what Dionne Brand has called "the calculus of living and dying" that white supremacy and racial capitalism administer, nor does it represent for me an exit (freedom) from its hold on Ocean or the rest of us.[3] Rather, it's a bit of poetry—a gateway for imagining nonmonetary forms of value. An invitation to consider something else.

Where Ocean imagined freedom from a future designed by UMG, Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures* (henceforth *QTBF*) looks, within the realm of the poetic, to expressions of what is beyond the future designed by racial capitalism. Drawing on the work of Audre Lorde and Franco "Bifo" Berardi, Keeling's wideranging project advances poetry as a method, "a way of entering the unknown and carrying back the impossible" (xii). Canvassing the poetic across cinema, digital moving image media, music, literature, and theory, *QTBF* considers in particular what Afrofuturist and Black queer critical and creative practices can tell us about

"imagination, technology, the future, and liberation...within the context of finance capital's stances toward (and investments in) the future" (4).

In poetry, Keeling sources a way to harness the uncertainty—the queerness—of the future that finance capitalism attempts to foreclose by way of such tools as the futures contract (more commonly called, simply, "futures"). In other words, whereas finance capitalism seeks to guard against any risk to ever increasing profits, poetics, as it appears across various forms and media, opens us onto the unforeseen possibilities that risk enables. If capitalism therefore consigns futures only to that which is presently knowable and if it seeks to police the imagination by limiting the possible only to that which is presently available to "common sense," QTBF alternatively considers how Afrofuturist and Black queer media reveal otherworldly and profoundly non-linear futures that exist here, now. "Here now" is a refrain that is echoed throughout Keeling's engagements with her capacious archive of audio, visual, and literary media, which she reads as instances of the impossible, errant, opaque, utopic and dystopic-the Black and queer. Asking what these works may offer us in the present and in our material relations to futures that remain beyond view, Keeling's theoretical and close reading practice is animated by a commitment to "the stubborn spatiotemporalities of our senses"—something that she again credits to Lorde's writing—so as to "intervene in the smooth and seductive assertions of capitalism's inevitability" (xi).

To explicate the fundamental antagonism over the very meaning of the "future" that is at the center of her inquiry, Keeling opens *QTBF* with an analysis of the Royal Dutch Shell company's future scenarios, which exemplifies how racial capitalism tethers the imagination to the present in order to project itself into a future where Black and Indigenous lives, and the planet on which we reside, remain in peril. [4] Introducing readers to the ambivalence of the future, Keeling details the brutal tactics Shell has used since its founding, and particularly since beginning its future scenario initiatives in the 1970s, to dispossess life, labor, land, and resources from Indigenous ecologies. Using the example of "the Ogoni nine," arrested and executed following non-violent opposition to Shell Oil's extractive operations in the Niger Delta, Keeling lays out the predicament she later argues Black queer media are primed to unmake and challenge. That is, the futures of





Drawing upon the cosmic ecologies Sun Ra evidences in John Coney's 1974 *Space is the Place,* Keeling searches for a way out a future prescribed by finance capitalism.

finance capitalism "are part of a knowledge project that has been calibrated to reproduce existing relations" (9). The future in-progress—being made here, now—is under constant dispute, subject to projections both by corporate entities such as Shell that seek control and by the ungovernable, endless creative force that Keeling identifies with the horizon of Black futures.

As Keeling's reading of Shell's extractive infrastructure and futures scenarios suggests, central to *QTBF*'s argument and analysis is the inseparability of contemporary finance capitalism from longer histories of racial capitalism, racial slavery, and its afterlives. Indeed, the stakes of Keeling's interventions are nothing short of life and death, as are the conditions of Black being *in the wake* of transatlantic slavery. [5] Drawing on Ian Baucom's *Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, she invokes the 1781 massacre aboard the British slave ship Zong, where the ship's captain ordered 150 enslaved Africans thrown overboard ("for want of water" [6]) on the (later confirmed) belief that it would trigger insurance monies as reimbursement for the *legal* murder of their human cargo.

Baucom explains how the "triangle trade"—from Europe to Africa to the Americas and back—relied heavily on credit ("imaginary value") to finance slaving operations that would eventually, upon exchange of commodity goods, confirm the credit's "money value" agreed upon by the lender (empire) and buyer (slaver). The court ruling in favor of the Zong's captain required the insurance company to confirm the (pre)existence of money value without commodity exchange, creating in effect a real debt from imaginary values materialized in the form of money value paid by the insurers.[7] The lives and deaths of the 150 massacred were socially, juridically, and economically imaginable only as money value lost. As Keeling explains, the "Zong massacre reveals that the economy of the transatlantic slave trade was a speculative one" (28). It brought into being the now familiar "geopolitical logics and material relations" (29) upon which the presiding imaginary value system of finance capital relies.

By drawing attention to the originary mechanics of racial capitalist speculation, Keeling reveals how the regimes of value birthed through the Zong massacre continue to structure Black existence and its futures. For Keeling, "Black existence" refers at once to the violent (re)production of Blackness and Black people as nonhuman other—that is, to the procedures through which white being becomes possible—and to the "creative invention" necessary to "Black belonging" that cannot be captured by this quotidian violence (36). Here enters the centrality of poetic cinema, music, and digital media to *QTBF*'s overall project. As relational tools and phenomena, these forms hold the capacity to practice, visualize, and enact ways of being that might spawn liveable futures for all: a future usurped, flipped, chopped and screwed in favor of Black life and liberation, a future that is indecipherable to the world birthed through the Zong.



Keeling reads Daniel Pebbles' *The Aggressives* (2005) exemplifying her use of "queer" to name not an identity but the ungoverned and ungovernable quality that exists in every now: an openness to chance.



From the outset, Keeling admits that she is indeed trying to sketch out something that confounds expression (Black liberation) and that *QTBF* in no way professes to know what might follow from it. However, what she is ushering readers to explore is how Black futures hold an investment in queer temporality. Queer, in Keeling's articulation, names not an identity but the ungoverned and ungovernable quality that exists in every now: an openness to chance. This is not to deny *queer* its vernacular use in North America by and for those who identify as "LGBT+" but rather reminds that such a reduction is a neoliberal and ahistorical







Space is the Place (1974) opens with Ra traveling through time to a 1943 Chicago night club where he *lights up* the keys and moves-out the crowd to compete with the Overseer for the end of the world—what *QTBF* articulates as a Black future, the impossible possibility of Black liberation.

"domestication" of the relation *queer* articulates.[8] In the realm of social life, we might understand "queer" as "change"—an eventuality that racial capitalism shrouds in fear for that which cannot be foreseen, controlled, managed, or guarded against. In capitalist terms, such queer eventualities emerge as risks to investment. Keeling reminds us that in "financial management, it is well known that 'time' itself produces risk" (19). Therefore, Keeling uses "queer temporality" to describe "that dimension of the unpredictable and the unknowable in time that governs errant, eccentric, promiscuous, and unexpected organizations of social life" (19).

Racial capitalism's efforts to project itself onto or into the future, by relying on present conditions of possibility "through calculations and algorithms devised to predict and control for randomness," "miss the ways 'queer' remains here and now in both recognizable and imperceptible forms" (19). Queer time is always already here, now, producing unforeseen and unforeseeable change, producing risk to the proscriptive futures by which Euro-American social life is ordered and through which its regimes of value and speculation are maintained. Black futures invested in queer time therefore exist "after the end of the world," Keeling explains with the help of Afrofuturist icon Sun Ra whose words entitle her first chapter (53). Black futures exist beyond what is imaginable to world systems that imprison futures for profit—"(Don't you know that yet?)" (53).



Afrofuturist icon Sun Ra featured in the opening sequence of John Coney's *Space is the Place* (1974) which Keeling reads in *QTBF* for Ra's temporal interventions *after the end of the world* where time has officially ended.

In Chapter 1, Keeling revisits Afrofuturism through the sonic influence of free jazz and Sun Ra's 1974 film *Space is the Place* (dir. John Coney), first enlisting the work of Gilles Deleuze to argue for the potential of sound and music to disrupt "the hegemony of vision in modernity" ushered through the cinematic. Keeling then reads Ra's temporal interventions in the film alongside Karl Marx's idea of "poetry from the future," outlined in the opening pages of *The Eighteenth* Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, to explore how that which "escapes or resists recognition...meaning and valuation" becomes "an impossible possibility within our shared reality...threaten[ing] to unsettle, if not destroy, the common senses on which reality relies for coherence" (62). For Ra, this impossible possibility is the project of Black liberation, to unsettle what Euro-American colonial violence has controlled through the muting of the sensory realm. For Ra, this project begins with the official ending of time. The ending, stopping of, or escape from time—more specifically, linear or "straight" time, as Keeling refers to it—is a recurring concept throughout QTBF and also a fundamental dilemma across Black studies and queer theory more broadly. As Keeling works to demonstrate, futures thinking is overdetermined by prescriptive readings of history and the

present that, as a result, lock perceptions of both space and time into regimes of *truth*, *reality*, or the *(im)possible*—what *can be* is ultimately beholden to, or only understandable based on, what has already been.

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Scenes from Daniel Pebbles' *The Aggressives* (2005) which Keeling notes for how it frustrates the audiences' access to the film's subjects through the absence of traditional markers of "straight time" and space.

Marx's "poetry from the future" is what Keeling likens to "wealth held in escrow," explaining that the imagining made possible by impossible futurist ideas, images, and sounds "indexes a surplus of meaning and valuation, unconfined to the terms through which poetry is legible today" (63). Carrying this concept forward into Chapter 2, Keeling surveys four films—Isaac Julien's 1989 Looking for Langston, Cheryl Dunye's 1996 The Watermelon Woman, Rodney Evans' 2005 Brother to Brother, and Daniel Peddles 2005 The Aggressives. She brings these films into conversation with one another to consider what can be gleaned from their varied temporal strategies. Keeling explains that the first three films re-present counternarratives of the past for what they can make visible in the present. By contrast, *The Aggressives* frustrates the audiences' access to the film's subjects through the absence of traditional markers of straight time and space (97). The Aggressives takes its title from the gender identity of the film's mostly Black subjects, each of whom presents masculine and describes themselves as a woman or female. Yet while Peddle chooses a conventional expository approach in his documentary, some of the information audiences may expect to learn about the documentary subjects is missing. Watching the film, one often cannot tell when or where any of the subjects are. Keeling argues that the film's spatiotemporal frictions expose how the impulse to locate (in space and time) is entangled with the "temporal structures and epistemological enterprises of policing and surveillance inherent in any framing of questions of representation and visibility" (102). Keeling thus meditates on the complicity of the cinematic, as well as the very desires for media visibility and recognition, with the everyday policing and surveillance of Black queer life.

Memorably put here is Keeling's contrast between "looking for"—as in Julien's *Looking for Langston*— and "looking after." Rather than an effort to locate, "looking after" bespeaks an enactment of care. Writing on M—, a feature character in *The Aggressives* whose whereabouts at the end of the film remain unknown, becomes a reflexive exercise for Keeling and one of the book's most revealing lessons on the ethical and political implications of looking. Indeed, what Keeling terms "the unequal calculus of visibility distribution" (101) names the inescapable dilemma facing many scholars in Black and queer studies: how to avoid opening the door to the violations, such as surveillance and control, that come by way of increased visibility. In her delicate reading, Keeling refuses to look for M— so as to apprehend them and make them knowable. Instead, Keeling finds in M—'s manifest absence at the end of *The Aggressives* an enactment of poetic errantry, a fugitive disappearance that confounds their locatability. This instantiates an impossible possibility, that is, Black liberation.

Apparent in Keeling's argument for a cinematic mode of "looking after" rather than a "looking for" is her struggle for the right to opacity, following the Caribbean poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant. For Glissant, opacity signifies an alternative to the Western preoccupation with transparency and understanding, which inevitably culminates in the imperial desire to grasp the world and to reduce every entity to the recognizable terms of a given order.

[9] [open endnotes in new page] Glissant's figure of opacity provides a conceptual challenge that is foundational to the text as a whole. According to Keeling, Black futures must hold on to opacity so as to withhold their availability to commensuration or their reduction to "common sense." This is because Black futures remain beyond the futures imagined by finance capital and beyond the futures that may be presently discernible as "real."





Scenes from Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) where Keeling's careful and memorable contrast between "looking for" and "looking after" begins.

Such questions of "reality" come to the fore in Chapter 3. Here, Keeling opens with a discussion of John Akomfrah's reflections on the freeing promise that digital mediation held for Black filmmakers of his generation. It is this promise that Keeling invites us to think with as she considers how the digital relates to the concept of the cinematic that she advanced in her 2007 monograph, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense.*[10] She writes.

"I understand 'the cinematic as involving not only the audiovisual technologies through which the cinematic continues to be produced and maintained as our commonly perceived reality, but also the sociopolitical and cultural processes through which we perceive what appears in any present thing" (122).

Accordingly, the ascendance of digital technologies does not mark the demise of the cinematic for Keeling. Rather, because digital mediation can more readily call into question the bond between image and reality that had previously been secured by appeals to the indexical and the profilmic, Keeling argues that the "the digital regime of the image" holds the capacity to free our perceptions from the confines of common-sense notions of "reality." As such, many possibilities for perception beyond comparisons to the "real" emerge. In Chapter 4, Keeling extends these ruminations on the possibilities of digital moving image media through readings of the work of legendary performer Grace Jones, with a specific focus on her 2008 music video for the song "Corporate Cannibal" directed by Nick Hooker.

QTBF's final chapter, "World Galaxy," is titled after the 1972 album by pioneering free jazz musician Alice Coltrane, which she produced while mourning the transition of her partner John Coltrane. This chapter enacts an opening of the text onto a "cosmic perspective" beyond nation-state formations that takes inspiration from Glissant's notion of *Relation*, outlined in his widely influential book *Poetics of Relation*. This cosmic perspective is not a linear move outward but an open flow and exchange that maintains "the right to opacity." Here Keeling returns her attention to Africa's significance in finance capitalism's futurist projections—the continent's projected status as "the zone of absolute dystopia," in Kodwo Eshun's terms (quoted in Keeling 205). (We can think here again of Shell's future scenarios.)





In Wanuri Kaihu's dystopian short film *Pumzi* (2009), forbidden dreams incubate a new (and old) world.

Against this backdrop, Keeling speculates on the undoing of capitalisms' dystopian futures for Africa through readings of two texts: the Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu's short film Pumzi (2009) and the Nigerian science fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor's novel Who Fears Death (2010). For example, in Pumzi—a breakout work for Kahiu who is more recently remembered for the queer Kenyan coming-of-age romance Rafiki (2019)—the capacity of the protagonist Asha (Kudzani Moswela) to dream is policed via pharmaceutical suppressants. The film's dystopian future, where water is recycled from human waste and rationed along socioeconomic hierarchies, marks the present reality in which Asha struggles and in which she dreams of lush green fertile lands to visit while she sleeps. Ultimately it is these unexplainable dreams that catapult Asha's decision to revolt against the confines of the present world, which have been set to secure a future in which the presiding authorities have already predetermined what might be "possible." In Pumzi, as in Okorafor's Who Fears Death, the "active creation of dreams, myths, and stories [emerge] as responses to the quotidian violence of [the] story's present" (205), catalyzing material transformations invested in the making of (im)possible futures that remain beyond view of the dominant order.

Taken together, *QTBF* offers much to the field of media studies should it be open to the leaps of imagination required by Keeling's intellectual poetry. Her generous readings and expansive archive produce encounters between media texts that readers may not have expected. These surprising, queer encounters encourage us to pause so as to look, listen, and think again alongside Keeling and the chorus of voices she has assembled. It is, after all, media that assists our imaginings of speculative futures by making them material to the senses. Through its urgent call to refuse racial capitalism's deathly hold on the present and future, QTBF offers a collage of imaginative possibilities, poetically braided together in a demonstration of what Black queer media practice generously reveals to its studied observers: first, an endlessly creative (productive and destructive) propulsion beyond the aesthetic and discursive confines of the Euro-American imaginary and its projections for the future(s); and, second, a fundamental unmasking of "the incalculable debt" (157) indexed in and by Blackness as the creative resource through which the world's present regimes of extraction, value, and accumulation are forged.

Returning briefly to *Endless* with Keeling's attention to the racial conditions of finance capital in mind helps one to conceive of Ocean's practice as an example of the impossible made possible. In a recent rare interview with Ocean, recording artist Cosima prefaced a question by saying:

"To a lot of artists who are trapped in deals and contracts you're something of a north star; when I was trying to find a way out of my record deal I read about what you did with *Blonde* almost every day."

[11]

Like the practice that Cosima describes, Keeling's *QTBF* encourages a reencounter with what has been prematurely deemed impossible. Finance capital records these such assertions of freedom as theft. In Ocean's case, one reporter labelled it as a "major fiscal coup" and another "the heist of the year," while rumors swirled of possible legal action. [12] These are signs of foreclosure on what, in fact, will always remain beyond the total grasp of finance capital's speculative and material extractions. It is all that which remains beyond grasp to which *QTBF* alerts its readers, who are called toward the (re)generative potential in every now, exalted in Black queer and Afrofuturist media whose bearings on our material present Keeling's sense of urgency make unmissable.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. The author would like to sincerely thank Michael Litwack as well as the editors and guest editors of *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*'s dossier "Futures of Marxism and Film and Media Studies" for their thoughtful and generous engagement throughout the writing process. [return to page 1]
- 2. Ocean had cut UMG out of virtually every profitable aspect of the album after repaying the label his \$2 million tab in recording costs, securing ownership of the songs themselves, and releasing another album, primed to eclipse the former, just 24 hours later. *Blond(e)* debuted at #1 on the Billboard 200 chart while *Endless*, still *just* a video, remained absent. After a week's worth of sales, Billboard estimated Ocean's net revenues from the self-released *Blond(e)* at \$1.77 million. Def Jam's first week revenues off *Endless* were estimated at either \$157,000 or \$13,000 depending on what the label had negotiated with Apple Music. Ocean would eventually re-release *Endless* on his own label via limited run vinyl, cassette and VHS tape but it, ostensibly, cannot amount monetarily to what Ocean would have received had UMG got what they wanted. Christman, Ed. "How Much Money Frank Ocean Has Made in the Past Week (and His Former Label's Potential Take, Too)." Billboard, 29 August 2016,

https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/7488063/how-much-money-frank-ocean-blonde-endless-debut-week-1-7-million-def-jam; Shaw, Brandon. "Frank Ocean pulls of heist of the year with *Endless* and *Blonde*." Cult of Mac, 27 August, 2016, https://www.cultofmac.com/443519/frank-ocean-endless-blonde-apple-music-exclusives/.

- 3. Brand, Dionne. "Dionne Brand: On narrative, reckoning and the calculus of living and dying." *Toronto Star*, 4 July 2020, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2020/07/04/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying.html?rf.
- 4. While Keeling's focus in *QTBF* is Black existence and Black futures, an analysis of settler colonialism and Blackness and/as Indigeneity is also present in her text.
- 5. See Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 6. "Gregson v. Gilbert. Thursday, 22d May, 1783. Where the captain of the slaveship mistook Hisaniola [sic] for Jamaica, whereby the voyage being retarded, and the water falling short, several of the slaves died for want of water, and others were thrown overboard...so much of the water on board was spent, that some of the negroes died for want of sustenance, and others were thrown overboard for the preservation of the rest." As quoted in M. NourbeSe Philip and Setay Adamu Boateng, Zong! (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 210.
- 7. "Such value exists not because a purchase has been made and goods exchanged but because two or more parties have agreed to believe in it. Exchange, here, does not create value, it retrospectively confirms it, offers belated evidence to what

already exists." See Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 17. Quoted in Keeling 28.

- 8. "That a particular historical trajectory of 'queer' has been domesticated in the United States—contained through the affirmation of 'gay marriage' and the increased visibility and recognition through which it was achieved—is simultaneously a sign of victory for a vivacious, bold, and heterogeneous movement for 'LGBT rights,' and evidence of a recent modulation of control vis-à-vis sexuality and the organization of social life. To the extent that the dreams and visions of the world for which queer and trans* Americans have struggled over time have not been exhausted in the acquisition of the right to marry, in the United States 'queer' remains an active and energetic reservoir for connection, affiliation, and experimentation" (Keeling 19).
- 9. As Glissant writes of the Western logic of transparent understanding, "In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce." See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190. See also Manthia Diawara's film Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation (2010). [return to page 2]
- 10. Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 11. Various. "The World According to Frank Ocean." *Dazed*, 11 June 2019, https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/44732/1/frank-ocean-john-waters-viviane-sassen-arca-adwoa-aboah-amandla-stenberg.
- 12. Christman, Ed. "How Much Money Frank Ocean Has Made in the Past Week (and His Former Label's Potential Take, Too)." Billboard, 29 August 2016, https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/7488063/how-much-money-frank-ocean-blonde-endless-debut-week-1-7-million-def-jam; Shaw, Brandon. "Frank Ocean pulls of heist of the year with *Endless* and *Blonde*." Cult of Mac, 27 August, 2016, https://www.cultofmac.com/443519/frank-ocean-endless-blonde-apple-music-exclusives/.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Latin American feminist film and visual art collectives

by special section editors, <u>Lorena Cervera</u>, <u>Sonia Kerfa and Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto</u>

During the last years, there has been a revitalization of feminist movements internationally. In Latin America, the performance of "A Rapist in Your Path" by the collective LASTESIS on 25 November 2019 put Chilean feminism in the global spotlight.



Women performing 'A Rapist in Your Path' by LASTESIS.

This revitalization is also pushing for political and legal reforms, such as the approval of a bill legalising abortion in Argentina on 30 December 2020. The alliances between feminists, artists, and filmmakers in Latin America are not new. Fuelled by the 1970s women's movement, several feminist film collectives emerged during this decade and used cinema to raise awareness about women's issues and to intervene in political contexts. Their films exposed issues related to reproductive rights, sexual violence, and the status of domestic work, amongst others. In recent years, numerous feminist collectives that combine different art disciplines have continued to address women's issues. Within this context, there are questions that need addressing:

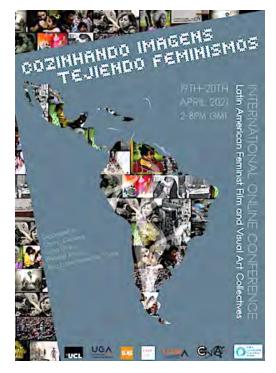
- What can current feminist activists, filmmakers, and artists learn from past struggles and their visual representations?
- How can artistic practices on women's issues most effectively raise awareness, initiate public debates, and change situations of injustice?
- How can collective and collaborative artistic practices transform the world around us?



Argentina approved a bill legalising abortion on 30 December 2020.



Mexican women demonstrate in 1978 for the decriminalization of abortion.



Poster of the conference 'Cozinhando imagens, tejiendo feminismos. Latin American Feminist Film and Visual Art Collectives'. Click on photo to see larger image.

The opportunity to edit this special section arose soon after the celebration of the international online conference "Cozinhando imagens, tejiendo feminismos. Latin American Feminist Film and Visual Art Collectives" in April 2021. This event gathered researchers, filmmakers, artists, and activists based in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom. The overall aim was to provide a space for reflection and discussion on relations between art and activism within feminist and women's movements through the study of women's collective artistic production at two key moments: the late 1970s, which was a formative moment for Latin American feminist cinema, and the current revitalization of feminist movements. The conference included panels, screenings, round-tables, and coffee breaks where organizations that promote the work of Latin American women presented their projects.

The conference was intended to be trilingual as speakers could present in English, Spanish, or Portuguese. Video recordings of the individual papers were submitted well ahead of the event, so the organizing team and volunteers could translate them and add subtitles. During the event, the live presentations and discussions were simultaneously interpreted. The aim was to bridge scholarly research conducted in these different languages and animate collective thinking among those writing about Latin American feminist film and visual art collectives. This commitment to bringing together research conducted and published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese has also manifested itself in this special section, where we have translated into English the work of scholars and practitioners who have never published in this language, as we will address later in this introduction. The trilingual aim of this event also meant that the audience could follow the conference in the language of their choice, which increased its reach, as demonstrated by the hundreds of attendees from different parts of the world.

One of the sessions of this conference was a round-table with feminist filmmakers Rosa Martha Fernández, Patricia Restrepo, and Gioconda Espina, who were part of the feminist film collectives Cine Mujer in Mexico (1975-1986), Cine Mujer in Colombia (1978-1999) and Grupo Feminista Miércoles in Venezuela (1978-1988), respectively. Despite the pioneering work of these feminist film collectives and the ongoing relevance of the issues they covered in their films, the historiography of Latin American cinema has too frequently overlooked their existence. As a matter of fact, this conference was the first time that these three women came together (even though online) in a discussion. Moreover, in the conference, two of their films were shown, *Cosas de mujeres* (Rosa Martha Fernández, 1978, México) and *Carmen Carrascal* (Eulalia Carrizosa, 1982, Colombia). We added English subtitles to the first film so now it can be programmed at international events, and we were able to rent the English version of the second film from the feminist film and video distributor Cinenova.



Frame from *Carmen Carrascal* (Eulalia Carrizosa, 1982, Colombia).



Frame from *Cosas de mujeres* (Rosa Martha Fernández, 1978, México).

We were unable to show any film by Grupo Feminista Miércoles given the poor quality of the existing digitised copies.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Since these three collectives have received increasing scholarly interest in recent years, we decided to shift the focus on this special section and shed light onto different past and recent collectives whose experiences and significance in the field have received less attention.[2]



Screen capture of the round-table with feminist filmmakers Rosa Martha Fernández, Patricia Restrepo, and Gioconda Espina, chaired by Elena Oroz with the kind contribution of Sara Bright.

Reflecting collectively on collective artistic practices in Latin America

Since the 1970s in the Americas, Europe, and beyond, artist collectives have proposed other languages and other paradigms of creation and dissemination according to an emancipatory perspective, and they have shown a great deal of mistrust towards cultural political projects of an authorial and elitist tradition. Often coming from the visual arts, they have favored critical artistic practices with a strong and local social anchorage and have questioned the place of art. Also favoring meaningful praxis over constructing art objects, the collectives have demonstrated for nearly half a century and with diverse temporalities and reconfigurations, the socio-political and aesthetic potential of cooperative artistic work.

In a dossier in the journal *ArteContexto*, entitled "Colectivos artísticos en Latinoamérica" (Art collectives in Latin America; Murria, 2004), Ana Longoni recalls the histories of these collectives on the continent. These date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, exploded with the avant-garde movements, and then reconfigured themselves to adopt revolutionary forms in the 1960s. According to the Argentinian historian, the power of these movements introduced a fracture that went so far as to postulate "a collective author"—in the words of painter Ricardo Carpani. In the collective, the creator becomes both anonymous but effective and is protected by the group. Thus the collective reveals itself to be valuable in dictatorial contexts.





This has been the case in Latin American countries where, faced with state violence and socio-economic inequalities, artists' collectives have always been present, even at the height of dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. The concept or idea of the collective is particularly acute in the field of Latin American film creation, as shown by the history of Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (New Latin American Cinema). A large part of its identity was created precisely by the collective will of filmmakers from various countries of the continent to take a stance against the cultural and political imperialism of the United States in the midst of the Cold War in order to radically change the course of history.

In the 1960s and 1970s, "to have a collective consciousness and self-perception as a collective led to repercussions in society" (Sarrouy, Cibea and Talellis, 2020). By becoming aware of the place they were denied in history, Latin American women filmmakers have thought about their practices by coming together. It is this dialectic between mixed and non-mixed collectives that is at work in the ColectiVIS-ARTS research project funded by IDEX at the University of Grenoble Alpes (France).

This project raises many questions related to the place of women artists in mixed collectives, their role in creation, and how the creative process can be rethought from other stances when a gender perspective is taken into account. The project, whose full title is "ColectiVIS-ARTS: Research on women's artistic (visual arts) praxis in mixed- and single-gender artist collectives in Latin America," aims to study the role of women artists in the creation and conceptualisation of collective projects. ColectiVIS-ARTS interrogates other artistic practices (popular, communal and identity-based initiatives) that act as "tools of social and political activism" (Marzo, 2016) proving that feminist art has always contained "a considerable political charge" (Popelka Sosa, 2010) on a continent rich in



Poster of an activity organized by ColectiVIS-ARTS. Click on photo to see larger image and information about event.





COLLECTIVISATIONS ET ACTIVISME ARTISTIQUE DANS LES SUDS

26 AVRIL 2022

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See also the videos from the online seminar Collectivization and Artistic Activism in the South. https://modernidadesdescentralizadas.com/actividad/collectivization-and-artistic-activism-in-the-south/

political, social and artistic experimentation.

To reflect collectively around these questions, the project brought together over two years (2020-2022) a dozen women researchers from different countries, working in universities or institutions in the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with an interdisciplinary approach involving the arts and literature, cinema, education and visual culture. This work has taken the form of various academic events: study days, seminars, research-creation performances and a colloquium—all with international reach. A database of artists' collectives in Latin America and a website will report on the results of this research. A series of filmed interviews with leading women from multidisciplinary collectives will be available online on a platform devoted to such, managed by the University of Grenoble Alpes (France).

The conference "Cocinando imagens, tejiendo feminismos. Latin American Feminist Film and Visual Art Collectives" was one of the main academic activities organised by ColectiVIS-ARTS. The closing lecture was given by Julia Lesage, editor of *Jump Cut*. After the conference, she proposed to Lorena Cervera and Sonia Kerfa, two of the co-organisers of the conference, to edit a special section for the journal *Jump Cut*. Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto joined them as a third coeditor. This special section is a continuation and an amplification of the conference's aim, shedding new light on the cartography of feminist arts and their inventiveness.

Our Special Section: bridging past and present experiences

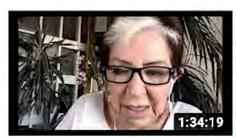
The first three articles of this special section recover overlooked feminist histories from the 1970s and 1990s by drawing on oral histories and a plethora of primary sources, including audiocassettes, pamphlets, press reviews, and photographs. Elena Oroz painstakingly reconstructs the landmark event Cocina de imágenes (Kitchen of Images), held in Mexico City in 1987 and conceived as the "First Exhibition of Latin American and Caribbean Film and Video Made by Women." Organized by feminist activist and filmmaker Ángeles Nocoechea, Cocina de imágenes stands as a pioneering event in the strengthening of audiovisual production made by women in Latin America and, as argued by Oroz, played a pivotal role in the development of transnational feminist film networks in the region.

Isabel Seguí and Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco recuperate the contributions of two film and video collectives led by women, offering historical approximations to these underexplored groups: the Peruvian Warmi Colectivo Cine y Video and the transnational Women's Film Project (WFP, later called International Women's Film Project, IWFP). Whereas Seguí redresses the long-standing *ninguneo* endured by María Barea and the Warmi Group she founded, Cavalcanti Tedesco retraces the trajectories across the Americas of pioneer feminist director Helena Solberg and the internationalist feminist film collective she led in the 1970s in the United States after leaving Brazil.

Moving forward and exploring contemporary practices of Latin American film collectives, Raquel Schefer focuses on the work of the anonymous Mexican group

Los Ingrávidos, paying special attention to the collective's denunciation of femicide in the country. In her theoretical piece, Schefer inserts the work of this hermetic group in two different genealogies in film culture: the collective filmmaking tradition and that of political and experimental filmmaking. Continuing with the focus on contemporary practices, the closing article by Lita Rubiano Tamayo sheds light on the work of two community filmmaking projects carried out in rural Colombia which are led by Black and Indigenous women respectively: the School Renacer y Memoria (Rebirth and Memory) and the School of Indigenous Communication Ka + Jana Uai (The Voice of Our Image).

To provide further insight into the work of feminist collectives currently active in the region, we have transcribed one of the roundtable discussion that took place during the conference "Cozinhando imagens, tejiendo feminismos" between visual artists working collectively today. The conversation was moderated by Colombian art historian Daniela Galán and the participants included members of Afroféminas (a platform that serves as a site of encounter for Afrolatinas in Spain), Colectiva Lemow from Guatemala and Trenzar Perú. We are excited to close this special section with an English translation of a chapter of LASTESIS' new book Quemar el miedo titled "El potencial político de la performance." In this piece they reflect about the political nature of their artistic practice, the potencia of their public interventions, and the unforeseen success of their viral performance "Un violador en tu camino" (A Rapist in Your Path). To accompany this special section we are also including a series of book reviews written by Leticia Berrizbeitia, Márgara Millán, and Karol Valderrama-Burgos, who assess some recent publications in Spanish and English that explore the work of pioneer Latin American film and video makers like Sara Gómez, María Luisa Bemberg, Pola Weiss or Valeria Sarmiento.





Mesa redonda con cineastas: Rosa Martha Fernández I...

Mesa redonda con artistas

visuales: Afroféminas |...

106 views • 1 year ago

62 views • 1 year ago

Screen capture of the contents available on the YouTube Chanel of Latin American Feminist Film and Visual Art Collectives. Click on image to see availability of videos from the event.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xeo2w8RktVA; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhm7WkhGkW4

As mentioned previously, in this special section we have made an effort to include Latin American researchers who are publishing in English for the first time. The task of translating these articles has been both exciting and challenging. Often academic texts do not only require translating words from one language to the other, but also translating ways of articulating and structuring ideas. These dialogues and translations have enriched this special section that amplifies the space initially launched through the conference. In this way, "Cozinhando imagens, tejiendo feminismos" continues to generate reflection and discussion amongst researchers who come from different countries, academic traditions, generations, and backgrounds. In this effort, we hope this multivocal and diverse space reaches the readers in compelling and thought-provoking ways.

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Notes

- 1. Other films produced by the Mexican Cine Mujer are Vicios en la cocina, las papas silban (Beatriz Mira, 1978), Rompiendo el silencio (Rosa Martha Fernández, 1979), Es primera vez (Beatriz Mira, 1981), Vida de Ángel (Ángeles Necoechea, 1982), Yalaltecas (Sonia Fritz, 1984), Amas de casa (Ángeles Necoechea, 1984), and Bordando en la frontera (Ángeles Necoechea, 1986). Some of the films produced by the Colombian Cine Mujer are ¿Y su mamá qué hace? (Eulalia Carrizosa, 1981), La mirada de Myriam (Clara Riascos, 1987), and La trabajadora invisible (Clara Riascos, 1987. This collective also became a distributor of Latin American women's cinema. Grupo Feminista Miércoles produced the medium-length documentary Yo, tú, Ismaelina (1981) and the videos Argelia Laya, por ejemplo (1987), Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo (1988), and Una del montón (1988).
- 2. The Mexican Cine Mujer has been addressed by Millán 1999; Rashkin 2001; Aceves 2013, 2014; Oroz 2016, 2018; Rodríguez 2019; Cervera 2022. The Colombian Cine Mujer has been addressed in Lesage 1990; Goldman 2002; Arboleda Ríos and Osorio 2003; Martin 2012; Suárez 2012; Cervera 2020, 2022b. Grupo Feminista Miércoles has been addressed in Kuhn & Radstone 1990; Schwartzman 1992; Torres San Martín 1996; Azuaga 2003; Raydán 2010; Monsalve Peña 2012; Cervera 2022a.

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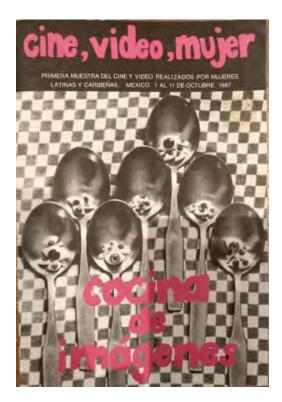
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Catalog and poster image for *Cocina de imágenes*.

Cocina de imágenes,

Primera Muestra de Cine y Video Realizado por Mujeres Latinas y Caribeñas (1987):

A pioneer event for tasting the recipes of Latin American women's filmmaking during the 1970s and 1980s

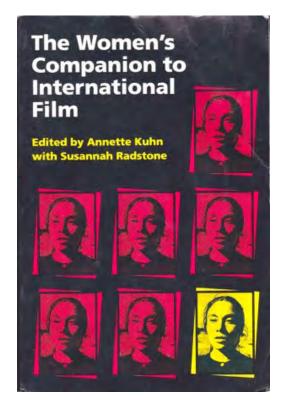
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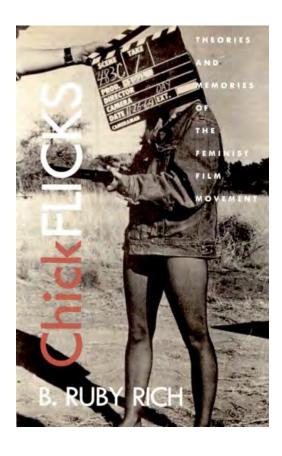
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Cocina de imágenes. Primera Muestra de Cine y Video Realizado por Mujeres Latinas y Caribeñas (Kitchen of Images, First Exhibition of Latin American and Caribbean Film and Video Made by Women) was held in Mexico City from October 1 to 11, 1987. According to its catalogue, 74 films in film format (16 or 35mm) and 46 videos were shown; in all, 120 productions from fifteen different countries. At the same time, the Cineteca Nacional in Mexico City hosted a symposium on the nature of women's cinema and the production and distribution difficulties faced by female film and video makers in the region. In addition, an informal meeting was held at the headquarters of the Zafra distribution company, with the participation of more than 50 women creators, programmers, distributors and scholars from various Latin American countries, the United States, Canada, and Spain. The exhibition was organized by Ángeles Necoechea, in close collaboration with Julia Barco and Guadalupe Lara, drawing on the considerable mobilization of women resulting from the Fourth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro held in Taxco, which brought together 1,500 participants.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Despite its one-off nature, *Cocina de imágenes* was a pioneering event in consolidating cinema made by women in Latin America and consequently in establishing transnational feminist film networks that originated in the region. Already in its day the exhibition was experienced and described as a crucial event. For example, Julianne Burton remarked on site the great opportunity it offered her to analyze women's films: "I knew this was going to be a historic meeting and I think it is" (*Encuentro* 1987). Later, she endorsed this perception in *The Women's Companion to International Film* when noting,

"Cocina was the historical equivalent of the 1967 festival in Viña del Mar from which the history of the New Latin American Cinema is dated: that founding moment when what have previously seemed individual concerns and isolated pursuits come into focus as a movement, a concerted endeavor that spans geographical borders and cultural, material and political differences" (235).





Having established the relevance of an exhibition that, nevertheless, has hardly had any academic repercussion beside a handful of scattered contributions (Burton 1990, Pick 1989, Vega 1998), my article has a twofold objective. First, I contextualize the origins of *Cocina de imágenes*, paying special attention to the background of its promoter, Ángeles Necoechea, and to the transnational feminist networks that enabled its existence. Second, I recover here the discussion topics present in the meetings held there, where important issues such as the role of film schools, collective work or the problems related to distribution and exhibition were addressed. In fact, the singularity of *Cocina de imágenes* also lies in the circumstances in Latin American media making in which it was set. It was a transitional moment marked by technological changes resulting from the nascent use of video and the redefinition of the thematic, aesthetic, and industrial concerns of women's cinema in the region after an initial, more or less militant, impulse.[2]

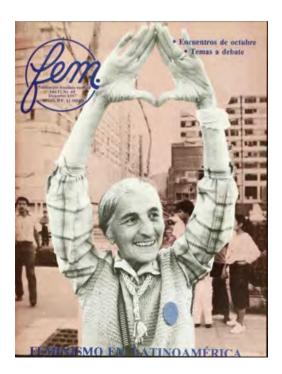
For this historical account, I draw from personal interviews, memoirs, and reviews published in the press or academic literature. The primary and crucial source is the sound recordings of *Cocina de imágenes* made by Julia Lesage, a participant and privileged eyewitness of the event, who generously shared them among various scholars and which I accessed thanks to the Latin American Women's Audiovisual Research Network (RAMA). These audios are a rich body of documentation whose partial publication prevents, to paraphrase Isabel Seguí in her reflection on feminist methodologies, the disappearance of women

"in the transit from oral records to written histories, which is to say, in the passage from unofficial to official history" (11).

In keeping with this observation, the vividness and immediacy of these records also allows us to evoke the experiential side of the gathering, restoring, as Ruby Rich proposes in *Chick Flicks*, "a set of lived experiences long since forgotten, shelved, or denied by those who went through them" (1). Thus, when referring to the work of pioneering filmmakers or critics of the 1970s in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, Rich remarked that

"it's more important than ever to acknowledge their contributions and valorize the nerve and will that made their interventions possible" (5).

This disappearance of women as originary figures is more flagrant in the case of



Issue 60 of Fem (December 1987) [Retrieved from https://archivos-feministas.cieg.unam.mx/]

Latin America and women's history. Although, in recent years, notable contributions have been published aimed at reassessing the women's contributions in the region during the 1970s and 1980s, we cannot forget that in the dominant historiographies,

"the militant revolutionary optic has underestimated even other forms of commitment such as the longstanding impact of feminism in cinema" (Paranaguá 76).[3]

The personal is political: Ángeles Necoechea's background and the organization of *Cocina de imágenes*

In December 1987, the Mexican feminist magazine *Fem* devoted a monographic issue to the Fourth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro* in Mexico, in which it also covered *Cocina de imágenes*. Among other articles, it included a chronicle (Hernández 1987) and a contribution by Ángeles Necoechea. In *"Cocinando imágenes,"* Necoechea offered an emotional account of the effort involved in its organization; in addition, for a reason, the text is full of notes on her love breakup resulting from the precarious balance between sexual-affective and professional spheres. While describing the uncertainties present during the process of organizing *Cocina*—lack of economic resources or insecurities related to the interest the event might spark—Necoechea underscored the vital role of the networking among Latin American colleagues, already forged in similar events, for the exhibition's existence. Specifically, she highlighted the support of Brazilian director Ana Carolina:

"the conversations with her clarified a lot about my work and, in general, about how we women (some of us and so far) live our creative work trying to incorporate it into the rest of our lives; about our insecurities, doubts and perhaps unnecessary sacrifices" (Cocinando 34).

This highly subjective writing in Necoechea's essay shows how the personal and the political converged in the genesis of *Cocina de imágenes*. As Ruby Rich observed, the first women's film festivals, which emerged as part of the feminist and countercultural momentum of the long 1960s,

"were experimental laboratories, producing a new feminist cinematic consciousness while simultaneously putting into practice the political commitment behind the activity. Every planning process was inevitably a political process as well. Debates took place on everything from programming choices to day care accommodations to ticket pricing" (*Chick Flicks* 31).

In this regard, the choice of name, "Cocina de imágenes"—in English, "image kitchen," "image stove," or "image cuisine"—was not a minor detail. Necoechea chose a domestic metaphor to continue advocating women's imaginaries, experiences, and approaches and to insert them into a public sphere, that of filmmaking, which was and still is highly masculinized. As she reflected in the article mentioned above,

"Personally, I love kitchens; I have spent most of my life in different kitchens. For me, it is the warmest place in a house. There I have had the most intense conversations, the most heated, the most intimate, the most joyful and the saddest. In the kitchen I have sat to work,



Members of the feminist collective La Revuelta: (top) Maria Brumé, Maiala Meza, Lucero González, Berta Hiriart; (bottom) Ángeles Necoechea, María Minera, Dominique Guillemet and Eli Bartra. Photo © by Carmen Landa.



Issue 1 of *La Revuelta* (September 1976) [Retrieved from https://archivos-feministas.cieg.unam.mx/. Click on image to see full size in new tab.]

write, draw, read. [...] I am under the impression that those who inhabit and enjoy their kitchens are warm and affectionate people" (*Cocinando* 33).

In keeping with this spirit, Cocina de imágenes was a horizontal meeting managed with a high degree of wilfulness and minimal resources. In addition to the money provided by Necoechea and Barco and some participants' individual and spontaneous economic contributions, Cineteca Nacional collaborated with providing an auditorium, and another governmental institution printed the graphic material (Necoechea 2021). Important for its promoter, the festival was not only an achievement in itself. On the contrary, she conceived it as an "invention," in which "how it is being made and lived" was an end in itself so that the "quality of the relationship" and the friendship between organizers and participants gradually grew closer during its preparation (Necoechea Cocinando 34). Years later, in a personal interview, she noted that her goal was "to prove to myself that it was possible to organize such an event as showcasing the great variety of cinema made by women in Latin America" (2018). In hindsight, it is worth suggesting that with this event she intended to put a sort of *finishing touch* to her broad engagement with the international women's liberation movement -neofeminism, as conceptualized in Mexico (Bartra 2002, Lau 2011)—and her activism conveyed through artistic practices.

Therefore, it should be noted that Ángeles Necoechea was a member of La Revuelta, an important feminist collective that, in addition to publishing a magazine of the eponymous name (1976–1978), carried out numerous performances and protests in Mexico City. Among them stand out La opresión de *la mujer* (1976), which ironically depicted the role of the government, the army, the Church and the media in the construction of femininity, and Obra sobre el trabajo doméstico, la pareja y el aborto (1978), an action connected to a feminist campaign aimed at drafting a voluntary maternity bill. In both instances, these practices were consistent with the main demands of Mexican feminism at the time (Bartra 2002, Lau 2011), whose agenda was marked by reproductive rights, violence against women, and the analysis of the social and symbolic spaces where male domination was most patent. Moreover, these interventions, and those of other feminist groups, redrew the Mexican urban and media landscape from a gender perspective in the context of the post-68 crisis (Aceves 2019), building a "feminist public sphere" (Rashkin 7) in which film soon became a central actor. Indeed, like many creators and intellectuals of her generation, Necoechea also approached cinema to propagate feminist ideas among a broad public (Rashkin 7), as her involvement in Cine Mujer proves.





[Above and left]

Colectivo La Revuelta performing *La opresión de la mujer*. Photos © 1976 by Ana Victoria Jiménez.





Colectivo La Revuelta performing *Obra sobre el trabajo doméstico, la pareja y el aborto.* Photos © 1978 by Eli Bartra.

Cine Mujer (1975–1986) was a pioneering collective that emerged at the CUEC (University Centre of Film Studies). It made an openly feminist cinema in Mexico, with clear transnational political and aesthetic connections (Oroz 2018, Aceves 2019). It addressed taboo subjects such as abortion, sexual violence against women, domestic life, or prostitution (Millán 1999, Torres San Martín 2008, Rashkin 2001).





Stills from *Cosas de mujeres* by Rosa Martha Fernández (Colectivo Cine Mujer,



1975-1978).

Within this group, Necoechea was an actress in *Cosas de mujeres* (Rosa Martha Fernández, 1975-1978) and later led two projects: *Vida de ángel* (1982), a documentary about the daily struggles of women from popular classes, and *Bordando la frontera* (1985), a piece that skilfully mixes documentary devices with a fictional plot to explore labour conditions in the *maquilas* and which, at the time, would be the collective's last film. The making of both films, of evident political and creative value, was highly complex, and Necoechea says she had a "frustrating" experience due to her inexperience in filmmaking and the difficulty of coordinating a team and adjusting to strict production schedules (Necoechea *Interview by Lesage* 1987). Consequently, she also contemplated *Cocina de imágenes* as an interim project, after which to return to film production with "less anguish" (Ibidem).







Stills from *Vida de ángel* by Ángeles Necoechea (Colectivo Cine Mujer, 1982)

Importantly, Necoechea was also part of Zafra, Mexico's leading independent film distributor, founded in 1978 and whose catalogue drew from national and international political cinema. Zafra was primarily active in providing material for alternative exhibition spaces, following the militant premise that films were an instrument for political reflection in the service of social struggles. Since its catalogue included the first works of Cine Mujer,[4] she deployed an intense international promotional campaign, showcasing the collective's films in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, which allowed her to meet Ana Carolina. She also travelled to Cuba to attend a screenwriting workshop with Gabriel García

Márquez, where she met the Venezuelan filmmaker Fina Torres. It was from that director that she learned as much or more than in the course as the two simply talked about work and cinema (*Cocinando* 33-34). Moreover, without her work at Zafra, *Cocina* would have been virtually impossible, since the company offered a minimal infrastructure—office, telephone, contacts—for its production. Necoechea also saw organizing *Cocina* as an opportunity to redefine what she considered a "very masculine" (2018) work and cultural space, thanks to an exciting project that would allow her to "make the most of the places and jobs that one inhabits" (*Cocinando* 34).

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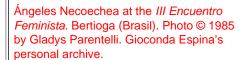
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A collective effort: transnational feminist networks in Latin America







Franca Donda and Gioconda Espina, members of Feminist Group Miércoles, at the *III Encuentro Feminista*, Bertioga (Brasil). Photo © 1985 by Gladys Parentelli. Gioconda Espina's personal archive.

Interviewed by Julia Lesage during *Cocina de imágenes*, Necoechea did not hesitate to present the exhibition as the result of a collective impulse:

"Now that we are in 1987, I feel it has been almost ten years of building and bringing together the ideas of many women. It is the work of many years of feminism, of political work with women, of making films and working for exhibition and distribution, not only for production."

Among these women she had worked with, besides those already mentioned, she highlighted her links with the Feminist Group Miércoles from Venezuela, Cine Mujer Colombia and Lilith Video from Brazil. In this regard, *Cocina de imágenes* cannot be understood without the grounds provided by the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros*, critical transnational spaces in which local activists redefined and renegotiated the distinctive identities, narratives, and practices of Latin American feminisms (Álvarez et al. 2003). As Lesage (1990) already observed, these meetings also helped build bridges between artists and to establish an incipient network of women working in film and media, as the background of the organizer of *Cocina de imágenes* aptly shows.

The first *encuentro* took place in Bogota in 1981, and significantly Cine Mujer Colombia's videotape *Llegaron las feministas* documented the event. The work includes a telling account by Dora Cecilia Ramírez:

"As a result of the meeting, we met a Mexican group called Cine Mujer, just like us. This confirms the current need for women to tell the story in our own way."





Stills from *Llegaron las feministas* by Cine Mujer Colombia (1981).





Dora Cecilia Ramírez in *Llegaron las* feministas.

Sara Bright in Llegaron las feministas.

Necoechea attended that *encuentro* in Bogota as a member of La Revuelta and although there was no specific film program that year, according to her, several groups brought their works: Feminist Group Miércoles presented *Yo, tú, Ismaelina* (1981) and Cine Mujer Mexico screened *Cosas de mujeres* and *Vicios en la cocina*.

Meanwhile, in the 1983 *encuentro*, held in Lima, a small public exhibition took place in a university. Films by Cine Mujer Colombia and Cine Mujer Mexico were screened again, and the showcase also included *No es por gusto* (Mari Carmen de Lara and María Eugenia Tamez, 1981), and works by Lilith Video or by the Chilean Patricia Mora (Necoechea *Interview by Lesage* 1987).

Finally, at the third encounter, held in Bertigoa (Brazil) in 1985, specific rooms were set up for film and video screenings and some fifty film and video makers gathered. Then the need for a specific encounter—what would become *Cocina de imágenes*—began to be discussed, even though, according to Necoechea, the conditions to organize it had yet to be met (Necoechea *Interview by Lesage* 1987).









Memorias del VIII Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano

Stills from some films screened at *Cocina de Imágenes include Oriana* by Fina Torres (Venezuela, 1985)....

Stills from Yo, tú, Ismaelina by Feminist Group Miércoles (1981).





Stills from Vicios en la cocina by Beatriz Mira (Colectivo Cine Mujer, 1978).

Another direct precedent of the exhibition took place in 1986: the seminar *La mujer en los medios audiovisuales* (*Women in the Media*) held at the Festival of New Latin America Cinema in Havana, which brought together a significant number of media professionals and researchers. Necoechea participated here with the paper "*Una experiencia de trabajo*" ("A Work Experience"), in which she reconstructed the collective memory of the Mexican feminist movement and the first feminist cinema. She underlined the feminist movement's transformative capacity in Mexico, individually and socially, and exposed the difficulties faced:

"[We were] treated like a bunch of insane women, talking about things that they said, 'were bonkers.' It was tough, but also, I must admit, invigorating. We were few, but we pressed hard. [...] We wrote, created magazines, put articles in national newspapers and tried to get into as many places as possible, and sometimes even impossible. All these forms of expression linked to or even generated by the Movement tried to bring to light a discussion that nobody wanted or dared to talk about" (158).

She also emphasized how the works of Cine Mujer, which she referred to as "genuine little warhorses" (158), paved the way for contemporary female filmmakers, while opening new challenges. She concluded:

"The films produced more recently are not like those made in the early years of the Feminist Movement, which had to and needed to talk about the fundamental issues under discussion at that time, and with the pressure to do so for the sake of being *good militants* and not so good filmmakers. Now we understand that the best militancy consists in making truly great cinema. [...] What we all must do now is to fight for the right to work, for the right to express ourselves freely, and for the right to create a quality cinema that is truly up to our dream and that of our peoples" (160-161).

This assessment is not trivial since, as I will point out, it shaped the programming of the exhibition and part of the debates that took place there. Finally, the event was publicly announced in Cuba and began to garner positive feedback. Asked by Lesage about both events, Necoechea pointed out several differences. In the first place, *Cocina de imágenes* opened a space for exhibition and close encounters between creators and not only devoted to discussion. Secondly, regarding the tone and content of the talks:

"I feel that it is difficult to talk about feminism in Cuba, isn't it? It is now difficult to talk about feminism in Mexico because it already means wildly divergent trends, and you must be very specific. This first



....Señora de nadie by Maria Luisa Bemberg (Argentina, 1982)....



....Sweet Sugar Rage by Sistreen Theatre Collective (Jamaica, 1984)....



...and *El crucero* by Julia Lesage (Nicaragua - USA, 1987).

Cocina de imágenes may have many shortcomings, but I think it has a very different quality. We are in an environment of women, accepted from the start, where we give ourselves a chance to talk about whatever we want and where there is no filter. In Cuba, the debate on equality or non-equality between men and women is very much glossed over" (Necoechea *Interview by Lesage* 1987).

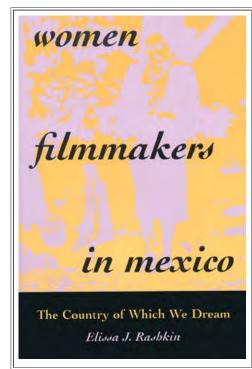
In terms of programming, *Cocina de imágenes* was remarkably varied and eclectic. However, far from including works by pioneering filmmakers as was usual in these events, it offered an overview of the productions made in the last fifteen years, paying special attention to the burgeoning use of video by artists, feminist and grassroots organizations, such as Lilith Video or Taller Popular de Video de Nicaragua.

Another guiding principle was the explicit aim to problematize categories such as "feminist cinema" or "women's cinema." According to the mandate expressed in Havana, Necoechea proposed that the event "should not become a militant affair" (2018). In other words, she set out to question labels perceived as restrictive by women filmmakers and which, in Mexico, shaped the critical reception of their work: from clearly derogatory[5] [open endnotes in new window] readings to the tendency to overlook their contributions and frame them in a stereotypical fashion (Castro Ricalde 2002, 2005). Specifically, she wanted to question the assumption that films led by women had to be explicitly activist or the fact that being feminist meant making a political film or one centred on the female experience. However, she also mentioned the high degree of subjectivity that prevailed in the programme:

"In most of the films the authors appear, their experiences, their consciousness, their way of seeing the world" (Necoechea *Interview by Lesage* 1987).

From this standpoint, the exhibition reflects a "discursive shift" and the articulation of other concerns of the "feminine being" (Millán 119 and 123) present in Mexican cinematography in the mid-1980s, which would stand out in the 1990s with the contributions of María Novaro, Busi Cortés, Marisa Sistach, and Dana Rotberg, among others. As several scholars have remarked (Millán 1999, Rashkin 2001, Castro Ricalde 2005, Torres San Martín 2008), these filmmakers renegotiated female subjectivity and defined their commitment to cinema from authorial and artistic perspectives, rather than explicitly political. As Rashkin (2001) concludes,

"their feminism, such as it was acknowledged to exist, was likewise not associated within the text with a larger social movement and, as we have seen in individual cases, could be ignored by viewers who preferred an apolitical reading" (217).





Therefore, *Cocina de imágenes* also shed light on a cinema made by women in Latin America that, shortly afterward, Ruby Rich (1997) would describe as based on a "shared subjectivity," on a movement from the exterior and revolutionary to the intimate and revelatory. Some reviews of the event, such as the one signed by Zuzana Pick (1989), echo this idea:

"Made on the margins of national film institutions, this resurgent filmmaking is tantamount to the attitude of women, whether it is called feminist or not [...]. It is a cinema/video enraged by oppressive silence that proclaims the liberation of desire in a wave of images and voices of resistance to traditional stereotypes" (146).

Likewise, Elvira Hernández's chronicle for *Fem* (1987) gathered testimonials that reflected a widespread feeling: affinity despite diversity. According to Colombian Patricia Díaz, the works screened shared

"very similar underlying intentions that speak of the emotional situation, the political life, the historical situation, of what we want as Latin American women and, above all, filmmakers" (Hernández 31).

Discussions and meetings: looking back and forward

In parallel to the screenings, the National Cineteca hosted a symposium consisting of three round tables, and an informal meeting was held at Zafra's offices. Both spaces aimed to foster dialogues and connections between filmmakers from different countries, disparate production contexts, and diverse backgrounds and priorities. Thus, these meetings were based on a shared commitment to challenging dominant film structures and the need to view and discuss feminist media and made by women from the region. In *Cocina de imágenes*, this recognition was even more urgent since some filmmakers who perceived themselves as islands. As Brenda Falcón expressed,

"sometimes you have the feeling that you are isolated in your country, that certain things happen only to you; for me it has been very significant, taking into account that in Uruguay we only are [sic] two filmmakers" (in Hernández 31).



Two of the pioneer Mexican women filmmakers, Matilde Landeta and



.... Marcela Fernández Violante.

Regarding the symposium, the first round-table was focused on Mexico's pioneer women and featured Matilde Landeta and Marcela Fernández Violante, then director of the CUEC.[6] Tellingly, at that time, both were the only female directors acknowledged by the country's film unions, along with María Elena Velasco. The second round-table brought together the experiences of several film and video makers: Haydée Ascanio (Venezuela); Zuzana Pick; Sara Bright and Eulalia Carrizosa (Cine Mujer Colombia); Jacira de Melo, Marcia Meireles and Silvana Afram (Lilith Video); and Mónica Vásquez (Ecuador). The third and last round-table addressed the Mexican context and was attended by Mari Carmen de Lara, María Novaro, Bertha Navarro, Busi Cortés, Lillian Liberman, María Eugenia Tamez, Rosa Martha Fernández and Marisa Sistach. Additionally, some 50 women from various countries in Latin America, the United States, Canada, and Spain participated in the Zafra meeting. The sound recordings of these sessions evidence a generalized enthusiasm, while the large number of participants made it impossible for a scheduled and organized debate. Instead, Cocina de imágenes generated a space where film and video makers just began to share their main concerns.

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Leaflet of *Yo, tú, Ismaelina* (1981), a short documentary by Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Click on image to see full size.



Clara Riascos and Sara Bright, members of Cine Mujer Colombia. Sara Bright's personal archive.

The Mexican women filmmakers' panel examined the crucial role of the film schools-CUEC (created in 1963) and CCC (Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica, founded in 1975)—in the emergence of a feminist cinema in the country and the progressive incorporation of women into the industry. In Mexico, both film schools enabled the production of an independent cinema made outside or at the margins of the traditional industry. CUEC, dependent on the National University in Mexico City (UNAM), put a particular emphasis on social concerns, film as a means of critical inquiry, and collective production (Millán 1999, Rashkin 2001). Moreover, the participation of women in the student movement and the revolts of 1968 and, a few years later, in the women's liberation movement catalysed the transformation of both militant cinema and the early women directors' individual struggles into a more collective and deliberate effort to create a woman-centred cinema (Rashkin 73). Group Cine Mujer or the documentary Mujer así es la vida (1976-1980) by Taller Cine de Octubre, also produced at the CUEC (see Rodríguez), are clear examples of feminist and militant trends. Later, these schools would be key hubs for women's professional access to the media industry milieu. Thus, the filmmakers who stood out in the 1990s—when feminism had a limited but significant impact on the national industry and international festivals (Rashkin 20)—came from the universities rather than working their way through industry ranks (Rashkin 7). In short, Cocina de imágenes was held in a context where film schools were experiencing a feminine effervescence, and the discourses on women's place in cinema were shifting.[7] [open endnotes in new window]

For Maricarmen de Lara, the significance of the film schools lay not only in the comprehensive training—being able to play several mediamaking roles—but also in the access to filmic material and equipment and in the freedom to choose themes and approaches that would have been hard to find in another production context. For her part, María Novaro, who made her feature film debut with *Lola* in 1989, pointed out that at film school, they acquired "certain bad habits" that hindered their careers. In her opinion, the problems of Mexican women's cinema resided in their "experimental" condition and their lack of access to the industry, a space yet to be conquered, where they could prove themselves and achieve the quality associated with commercial cinema. In turn, she said, this would allow them to "reach an increasingly larger audience, to make films that would no longer remain in the women's circles and make our messages transcend" (*Mexicanas* 1987). In line with Necoechea's opinion, Novaro also questioned the equation between feminist militancy and women's film:

"I had been a feminist since well before I realized that cinema was my vocation and, while making films, I am always a feminist. So, one of the things that have been very challenging for me has been not to feel that all women who make films have a feminist position. Making films from a woman's point of view is one thing and being a feminist is something else" (*Mexicanas* 1987).

If, as these notes attest, *Cocina de imágenes* was held in a national and regional context (Torres San Martín 2008) characterized by significant incursions of women into the industry, the future of independent cinema and the nature of collective work—which until then marked much of the feminist interventions in the region (Oroz 2018, Cervera 2020 and 2022)—was a cross-cutting theme. These debates were marked by previous experiences—tensions regarding



Rosa Martha Fernández, member of Cine Mujer, with Arturo de la Rosa. Source: Magazine *Imágenes*. October 30, 1974. Courtesy of Hemeroteca Nacional de México - UNAM.

Stills from *Mulheres Negras* by Silvana Afram (Lilith Video, 1986) and

leadership and the progressive need to develop individual projects—which, for example, were determinant in the breakup of Cine Mujer Mexico (Gautier 2005). In this sense, Sara Bright of Cine Mujer Colombia pointed out that the need to share horizontal work experiences could be wonderful but very painful (*Encuentro* 1987). Furthering this idea, her colleague Eulalia Carrizosa stressed the discords they experienced resulting from feminist practices:

"As I live it, cinema is not only a production team of women making films. It has also been linked to the sometimes heart-breaking work of self-knowledge and questioning power relations in society and even among women. With our failures and successes as well, at both individual and collective levels" (*Latin American Women* 1987).

For her part, Rosa Martha Fernández—who left Cine Mujer Mexico in 1981 to travel to Nicaragua—acknowledged these contradictions. At the same time, she underlined the energy that drove these pioneer initiatives during

"the rise of feminism—where it was the beauty and poetry of absolute solidarity; that we are sisters, we are all for all; the search for our personal and historical identity" (*Mexicanas* 1987).

Beyond these observations regarding the groups' dynamics, it should be noted that national and international funding sources strongly determined the survival of these collectives. In the 1980s, in Mexico, the production-distribution circuits that enabled an independent cinema in 16mm dwindled until they were virtually cancelled (Millán 118-120). As Novaro and de Lara stated, Mexico did not have specific support for short films or videos—as was the case in Colombia (Cervera 2020) or Brazil (Marsh 2012). Similarly, once the "Decade for Women" was over, there were no specific funds from the United Nations; grants that, for example, in Mexico made possible *Vida de Ángel* (1982). In de Lara's ironic observation,

"it seems that once the decade inaugurated in 1975 was over, women were falling out of fashion."

In addition, Cine Mujer Mexico could not rely on the support of crucial non-governmental organizations for independent and alternative media productions made by women in the aforementioned neighbouring countries. Unsurprisingly, de Lara suggested that the definition and organization of the collectives ought to be a discussion topic, but also how decision-making was subject to limited budgets and the enormous energy devoted to raising funds (*Encuentro* 1987). And that without forgetting the *triple workday*—paid work in the media which they had to combine with their unpaid independent projects and housework (De Lara in *Mexicanas* 1987).

While these interventions reflect experiences and feelings derived from initiatives that emerged in the previous decade, the participation of Lilith Video, founded in 1983, opened new perspectives. The group shared a political agenda with other collectives (Goldman 2002, Marsh 2012) but differed in the technology employed, video, the implementation of which in the region was very uneven (Aufderheide 2002). Lilith opened their presentation by contextualizing the effervescence of independent video in São Paulo and highlighting the protagonist role women played in the video medium, as the I Vídeo Mulher (Video Woman Festival), organized by Maria Angélica Lemos in 1987, proved. Their intervention focused on relations between technology and the representation of reality from a feminist perspective. They indicated that they chose video for its uniqueness, highlighting its comparative ease of use, flexibility, and novelty (*Latin American Women*



.... Beijo na boca by Jacira Melo (Lilith Video, 1987).

1987). Specifically for Marcia Meireles, video was already the primary medium in the construction of social imaginaries:

"I belong to an urban, television generation. I have always loved television, and I have always received a lot of information from it; I have always been very attentive to television, at the level of the form itself [...], the same as with language, there is no single method, is there?" (*Video Mulher* 1987)

Hence, its innovative character rendered video an ideal medium for feminist languages and practices, as it lacked the imprint of the patriarchal structures so present in the media industry (*Video Mulher* 1987). In contrast to the specialization and the apprentice system and rank logic prevailing in cinema production, in her view, video was in itself

"an expression of collectivity. It promotes a group experience, and the collective process is infused in the magnetic tape" (*Latin American Women* 1987).

Explaining the methods deployed in tapes such as *Beijo na boca* (1987), Lilith Video underlined the possibilities that video offered for rendering complex temporalities: whether it was the rhythm of the city or the oral testimony in its entirety without being tied to a script or not needing the availability of expensive film material (*Video Mulher* 1987). According to Meireles, with video, each work was an experiment to test new ways of approaching women's reality, their different pacings in moving, talking or expressing themselves while also acknowledging the relationships between filmmakers and social actors (*Latin American Women* 1987).

Finally, one of the most noteworthy aspects discussed at these meetings was the international distribution of the works, indicating the cooperative and networking role of the first women's film festivals (Kamleitner 2020). Thus, in *Cocina de imágenes*, participants expressed a clear interest in coordinating activities once the festival finished, trying to generate contact lists, or requesting brochures about available women's film productions. At the Zafra meeting, the discussion revolved around a crucial problem: the limited distribution and knowledge of Latin American women's films in the region and other latitudes. And this needed to happen not just through feminist film networks—consolidated to some degree in Europe and the United States or Canada, via distributors and themed festivals—and audiences built on the basis of gender, but also by keeping in mind the need to "break the tiny circles," in the words of Jackie Reiter, member of VideoNIC, or to "break out of anonymity, marginality, the fact that only we see each other," as another filmmaker expressed (*Encuentro* 1987).

Although the participants had little time to present their projects, they brought to the table several initiatives to strengthen a transnational feminist network that are worthy of mention for tracing the paths opened by the event.

- Cine Mujer Colombia pointed out that their collective also worked in distribution;
- from Nicaragua, the development of a video archive on Central America was mentioned as a project;
- Rosa Bosch, who worked at the American Film Institute, commented that they were working on a film library of Spanish-language productions;
- Debra Zimmerman, from Women Make Movies, mentioned their Punto de Vista series, a Latina program launched in 1983; and
- María García Pérez, from the Women's Institute of Spain, outlined a video library underway that could soon include Latin American productions.

Along with professionals involved in distribution, exhibition, and preservation, *Cocina de imágenes* gathered critics and academics such as Julia Lesage, Julianne Burton, Zuzana Pick, and Carmen Huaco-Nuzum. In the latter's words, her work was that of a "propagandist," so the exhibition allowed her direct contact with filmmakers to promote the films back in the United States, where Latin American production had minimal visibility. For Zuzana Pick, based in Canada, the event meant joining and pushing the collective momentum by being "aware of what is happening, what has happened, and what we want to happen," with all of them working together in collaboration (*Encuentros*).

Final considerations: an archive of possibilities

In keeping with the women's film festivals that began to emerge in Europe and the United States in the 1970s (Rich 1998, Kamleitner 2020), *Cocina de imágenes* offered a unique opportunity to showcase the films and videos made by Latin American and Caribbean women, as well as those of others with connections to the region, during the last fifteen years prior to its celebration. Following the principles of horizontality and collectivity and the personal and political commitment to using filmmaking to make new subjectivities visible, the festival built up a novel and indispensable transnational space for women involved in film and video production to become acquainted and share concerns. The event certified both an important momentum of women and feminist film practices in Latin America and the shifting dynamics of the feminist movement in the region in that period—its theoretical, practical and cinematic debates (Alvarez et al. 2003, Castro Ricalde 2005).

While the plurality of voices I have sought to collect attest to these changes and the shared interests, this account is inevitably fragmentary and incomplete. In a preliminary drafting phase of this article, Julia Lesage warned me that *Cocina de imágenes* meant many different things to the women who participated. In this regard, some experiences and practices that have just been mentioned, such as the popular video produced in Nicaragua, could have been further explored using additional oral sources. Aware of these gaps, my aim has also been to reactivate the existing documents on the event in the hope that they may be helpful for future research concerning individual filmmakers or general trends.

In the same vein, the sound recordings exposed here lend themselves to other research methods that allow transcending their condition of testimony so that their value can be updated in connection with other documents—such as possible photographs of the event or an extensive research of press reviews—and other personal memories about *Cocina de imágenes* impact on the circulation of Latin American women's cinema. This thorough research is yet to be done, as Patricia White argues, it would be essential for "placing women's cinema in an archive for the future" by recalling "the material practices and spaces of the 1970s and 1980s "cinefeminism" (2006, 146). In short, to assemble an archive of a specifically Latin American "cinefeminism" could reflect

"the material practices and spaces, the activist practice of making women's films accessible to the public, primarily through exhibition, distribution and critical writing" (White, 146).

From this perspective, *Cocina de imágenes* can be seen both as an event to continue adding voices to and as a breeding ground for ideas that never saw the light of day. This latter focus would delve deeper into the possibilities and constraints for building transnational feminist filmmaking networks in the region during the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s and their future rearticulations. First of all, it is worthwhile to look at the event itself. All attendees agreed that it was a success, and the possibility of a second edition was raised. However, the



Cover of Miradas de Mujer. Encuentro de cineastas y videoastas mexicanas y chicanas, edited by Norma Iglesias and Rosa Linda Fregoso, El colegio de la frontera norte, 1998. The book recovers the encounters that took place in the exhibition México-Estados

Unidos, Cruzando Fronteras/Crossing Borders, held in Tijuana in 1990.

festival, which involved immense work and personal effort from its promoters, had no continuity. The San Francisco-based Latino collective Cine-Acción expressed interest in bringing it over to the United States in October 1988, but there is no record that it took place. Although this illustrates the fragility of feminist initiatives to be sustained over time, it should also be noted that the event paved the way for subsequent landmarks events such as the Latin Women Film and Video Makers *Encuentro: México-Estados Unidos, Cruzando Fronteras/Crossing Borders*, held in Tijuana in 1990, whose reports state that *Cocina de imágenes* was a point of reference for its participants (Vega 21). In sum, this possible cinema-feminism cartography is not straightforward but riddled with forks and probably dead ends, both waiting to be explored.

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Notes

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- 1. The main debates and testimonies of the gathering were collected in *Memoria del IV Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe*, edited by Amalia Fisher, Berta Hiriart, Eli Bartra and Lucero González. Taxco: 1987. [return to page 1]
- 2. It is worth mentioning another *transitional movement*: the impact of popular feminism on filmmaking during the 1980s, fundamentally in documentaries. Despite its importance in Mexican and regional feminism (Bartra 2002), this issue did not constitute a specific topic of debate in *Cocina de imágenes*. Nevertheless. many programmed films incorporated these perspectives; this would be the case of several works by Cine Mujer Colombia and Grupo Feminista Miércoles, *Dos veces mujer* (Patricia Howell, 1982) and *No les pedimos un viaje a la luna* (Mari Carmen de Lara, 1986).
- 3. While not aiming for a thorough recount, impossible due to the limitation and purpose of the article, it is worth mentioning some studies focused on various feminist collectives in the region, female or mixed, such as Aceves (2019), Cervera (2020, 2022), Rodríguez (2019) and Seguí (2018), as well as those aimed at questioning the canon of the New Latin American Cinema (Tedesco, 2020).
- 4. Cosas de mujeres (Rosa Marta Fernández, 1975-1978), Vicios en la cocina (Beatriz Mira, 1978), Rompiendo el silencio (Rosa Marta Fernández, 1979) and ¿Y si eres mujer? (Guadalupe Sánchez, 1979).
- 5. The observations of Jorge Ayala, a leading figure in Mexican film criticism, are instructive. Regarding the works of Cine Mujer he issued a fierce criticism, accusing them of formal and ideological weakness: "The feminist cinema of Rosa Martha Fernández could go to rest; due to her inability to handle filmic language (...) Mexican feminist cinema died as it arrived. No matter how much the feminist mountains rumbled, its birth resulted in a squalid and scared little mouse" (454 and 462). On the contrary, regarding women's films of the 1980s, he pointed out that: "The solution of a feminist cinema could never be found in an avowedly feminist and always aggressively dented cinema, but in a personal, involved and distant cinema at the same time" (460). [return to page 2]
- 6. Also scheduled to participate, according to the catalogue, were Josefina Vicens (1911-1988) and Janet Alcoriza (1918-1998).
- 7. In the 1980s, the female presence in the country's film schools was equitable, and significantly in 1987, the CCC admitted more women than men (see Rahskin 2001). [Return to page 3]

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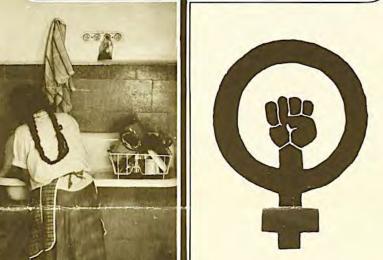






El movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer en México busca con esta publicación crear un órgano de difusión del feminismo en nuestro país. Sin embargo, ante la diversidad de corrientes y enfoques que ha tenido y tiene el feminismo nos vemos en la necesidad de precisar qué entendemos por feminismo. Para nosotras representa la lucha de las mujeres contra su opresión y explotación específicas -subrayamos la palabra específicas para indicar, de este modo, que la finalidad del feminismo no sólo es la de poner de manifiesto y luchar contra la opresión y explotación que sufren las mujeres en nuestra sociedad, debido a la división de clases- que sufrimos por el "simple hecho" de ser mujeres. Sostenemos que la mujer asalariada es doblemente explotada: una obrera no sólo es explotada por el patrón, sino que además es oprimida y explotada como ama de casa. Nosotras, sin perder de vista la división clasista de la sociedad, nos proponemos luchar contra el sexismo, es decir, contra la división de la sociedad por sexos, que nos discrimina como personas en todos los niveles: en la escuela, en la casa, en la calle, en el trabajo.

A partir de una concepción feminista de nuestro mundo, el movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer se propone, por un lado, luchar por una serie de reivindicaciones o logros parciales que se pueden obtener dentro del sistema en que vivimos con el fin de conquistar algunos derechos que no tenemos hasta el presente: Queremos obtener el derecho a abortar libre y gratuitamente. i Queremos ser dueñas de nuestros propios cuerpos! Necesitamos guarderías para dejar de ser esclavas de los hijos. Exigimos la equitativa repartición del trabajo doméstico entre hombres y mujeres.



verdadera liberación de la mujer y de todos los hombres.
El movimiento surgió en México, como en muchas otras partes, de una necesidad de unión. Del desencanto, la insatisfacción, la frustración que las mujeres experimentamos en el aislamiento de la vida cotidiana surge la necesidad, en un principio tal vez puramente instintiva, de unirse con otras muje-

estos sentimientos es el primer denominador común de las mujeres. Por medio de la comunicación, el intercambio de ideas sobre las experiencias vividas individualmente, las mujeres cobramos conciencia de que no se trata de problemas individuales, de que nuestros problemas son también los problemas de otras mujeres y de que son, a fin de cuentas, problemas sociales.

res. La necesidad de comunicación, el deseo de saber el porqué de todos

La toma de conciencia nos lleva necesariamente a actuar hacia afuera y a buscar formas de organización que nos permitan llevar adelante la lucha para que aumente día con día la conciencia de mujer en las mujeres. Nuestra lucha nos impone, por el momento, una autonomía con respecto a los hombres. En todas las organizaciones o partidos políticos mixtos, los que propugnan un cambio, para no hablar de los otros, se sigue manteniendo a la mujer en su papel tradicional; además, la cuestión de la opresión de la mujer es considerada como un problema secundario, subordinado, que "ya se resolverá después del cambio social".

Para nosotras no habrá ningún cambio real si no participamos con nuestras propias demandas y si no luchamos desde ahora por alcanzar la liberación de la mujer.

Con base en esta autonomía y dadas las ilimitadas dificultades que se nos presentan para difundir nuestras ideas y expresarnos en los organos de difusión existentes, hemos decidido sacar nuestro propio periódico. Ya no queremos que otros escriban sobre nosotras. Ahora nosotras escribiremos de y para nosotras.

Consideramos que un periódico feminista representa un arma más para concientizar. Pretendemos con este primer número, iniciar la discusión, el intercambio de ideas y la comunicación entre las mujeres. Queremos, además, aprender algo que tradicionalmente nos ha sido negado: expresarnos de múltiples maneras.

LAS MUJERES TOMAMOS LA PALABRA





Ctaller editorial, s.a.

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Maria Barea [left] on location for Antuca.



Peruvian director, Nora de Izcue.

Warmi: the first Peruvian women-led film collective

by Isabel Seguí

Warmi Cine y Video, the first group of Peruvian women filmmakers, was founded in Lima in 1989. They released their last work in 1998. The 1990s were an agitated period in Peru. The totalitarian drift of the state, under a de facto dictatorship headed by Alberto Fujimori, created an asphyxiating atmosphere. Political agendas focused on the bloody internal armed conflict (1980-2000).[1] [open endnotes in new window] In that troubled context —without ignoring it but determined to highlight what did not make the headlines— this collective, led by María Barea, managed to make a series of films that constituted a new kind of discourse in Peru due to their ability to *mettre-en-scène* the lives of unacknowledged lower class women.

Warmi's films give voice to slum settlers, Indigenous domestic workers and girl gang members and emphasize their subjects' political practice and subjectivity. Other Peruvian filmmakers have worked with oppressed populations in collaborative cinematic processes (i.e., the Cusco School, Nora de Izcue, Federico García and Pilar Roca, or the Chaski group). However, Warmi's focal programmatic goal was to highlight women and girls' agency. Even now, the contribution of the Warmi collective to Peruvian cinema has not been properly historicized; indeed, it has been silenced. Film historians in Peru have a certain contempt with which they have treated María Barea —and other crucial female figures, such as Marianne Eyde—in a way that speaks to the historical monopolization of the cultural sphere in Peru by privileged westernized men.

A masculine bias to the construction of the historical narrative is not surprising, but it is harmful. These women filmmakers delivered timely contributions to national social process as they developed collaborative alliances with working-class organizations and disenfranchised subjects. They employed resourcefulness and ingenuity while receiving very little institutional or financial support, only later to be systematically neglected by the gatekeepers of film scholarship and film criticism.[2]

A verb in Spanish describes perfectly this kind of neglect: *ningunear*. It literally means to make nobody (of somebody). The Cambridge dictionary translates it as "to look down on, to belittle."[3] The Warmi group, and so many other women in Peruvian film history, have systematically been "made nobody," erased, and dismissed from the official accounts. My article, devoted to Warmi, has a simple goal: to start historicizing the collective and stop the *ninguneo*.[4]

In fact, mine is not an individual initiative. In recent years, several film scholars have been contributing to the subversion of the patriarchal narratives of Peruvian cinema history. They are colleagues, members of RAMA (Latin American Women's Audiovisual Research Network) such as Gabriela Yepes, Lorena Best,



Peruvian-Norwegian director: Marianne Eyde.

Sara Lucía Guerrero, Marina Tedesco, Sarah Barrow and Carla Rabelo, and others, like Mónica Delgado and Fabiola Reyna. Feminist film histories across Latin America are collective endeavors that seek to change hierarchical academic practices and transform colonial institutions of knowledge creation.

Framing Warmi using Third Cinema theory and María Lugones' feminist pespective

Canon formation, awards systems, the festival circuit, and other often-unquestioned mechanisms propped up by film scholars, film critics, and the industry contribute to a narrow vision that gives pre-eminence to two types of value: aesthetic and commercial. Nevertheless, a methodological focus on film as an object reduces the scope of its political significance. All of the above aspects of cinema, in fact, contradict the essential principles of Latin American political cinema, and this led Third Cinema theoreticians and practitioners to propose a schema that inverted the priorities.[5] Consequently, many Latin American filmmakers accepted a different goal, insisting that in their work 'use value' was crucial (Burton 1997, 180). Julio García Espinosa, in 1969, in his groundbreaking manifesto "For an Imperfect Cinema" affirms a new goal for filmmaking:

"Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in quality or technique (...) is no longer interested in (...) 'good taste.' (...) The only thing it is interested in is how an artist responds to the following question: What are you doing in order to overcome the barrier of the 'cultured' elite audience which up to now has conditioned the form of your work? The filmmaker who subscribes to this new poetics should not have self-realization as his [their] object." (García Espinosa 1997, 82)

Warmi practiced Third Cinema by questioning the forms and structures of both first and second cinemas. From the outset, they challenged technical magnificence and refused to accept the external impositions of a seemingly perfect cinematic language. Moreover, they ignored fetishism in the cult of the auteur's personality. Barea, the director of Warmi's films, did not have self-realization as a goal. Furthermore, if Barea had been a formal perfectionist, she probably would never have dared to make films because she lacked the technical background and training in European traditions—two aspects that, from a colonial approach to cinema, give legitimacy to a filmmaker.

Theories of Third Cinema shifting attention to 'use value' allows us to see film's political work far better than a primary focus on aesthetics or representation. When accomplished women producers and disseminators (such as María Barea) become directors, their films are made with an eye to communicative effectiveness. Barea's priority was to represent the human experience of the subjects of her films and to create of politically useful movies to be employed as consciousness-raising and popular-education tools, in the Freirean sense. Although an aesthetically bold style may be absent in Warmi's films, they are



Jorge Sanjinés and Beatriz Palacios editing *Get out of here* (1977). Photo by Cristobal Corral.





Titles reveal collaborative making of *Women of El Planeta* both with women settlers of barrios jóvenes, their organizations, and her family and friends.

thematically adventurous and efficient. The films fulfilled different functions, such as increasing poor women's self-esteem, raising their social awareness and fostering their agendas. Warmi's cinematic practice is exemplary in that if offfers a sympathetic modality for a cinematic practice where care and community building are at the core.

In their practice, few women making Latin American social cinema were publicists. They rarely devoted themselves to reflecting publicly about how their cinematographic practice challenged a Western paradigm. Some like Beatriz Palacios, Marta Rodríguez, and the collectives Cine Mujer in Mexico and Colombia did do some of this, although they rarely gathered the attention of critics and scholars. Those, such as Barea, who did not theorize their approach and did not deliver highly aestheticized products, have been even more ignored—regardless of the remarkable political processes behind their work and the precious resulting films. Meanwhile, male directors like Julio García Espinosa, Fernando "Pino" Solanas, and Jorge Sanjinés wisely both made films and explained the theory behind what they considered political cinema. They knew they were making films for the people while using avant-garde aesthetics and also writing theory to feed the intellectual sphere (Tedesco 2019, 15-16).

Barea was not a public intellectual. Moreover, by often being one of the few women of on a film crew, she was frequently expelled from the artistic decision-making core group (who share techie interests and cinephilic discussions). These well-known practices of exclusion are why, in the neighboring country, Bolivia, Jorge Sanjinés and Beatriz Palacios (the driving forces behind the Ukamau group from 1974 to 2003) staked a claim for a decolonized film criticism. And that is why Palacios spent her entire life collecting the testimonies of subaltern spectators, many of them Indigenous women, to gather convincing arguments to justify the meaning of work made side by side and in collaboration with the voiceless. A director making political cinema might have reason to remain distanced from the gatekeepers of taste (Seguí 2021, 81-83).

In fact, the only evident influence that Barea recognizes by a filmmaker is Sanjinés. However, she never refers to those Sanjinés-style linguistic innovations that mesmerize filmmakers, scholars, and critics. She recalls that during her work experience with him she learned how he approached the Indigenous *peasants* who were the subjects and protagonists of the film *The Principal Enemy (El enemigo principal,* 1974). She was fascinated by his respect towards them and how he earned the trust that allowed them all to create a meaningful and useful film together.

Hence, inspired by Sanjinés but soon beating the teacher, Barea directed emancipatory films using a participatory methodology. The work method was collaborative not only due to her partnership with the protagonists but also in how she managed the horizontal workflow of each project. She fostered distributed creativity effectively and in a more organic way than she had seen in the Ukamau group. Barea listened to the crew, learned from them, and considered their professional opinion. Her approach to collaborative work and collective filmmaking was not abstract but ethical and practical.

In that regard, Barea's approach is similar to that of philosopher and activist María Lugones, who talked about, wrote and practiced a feminist ethos based on friendship that she named Pluralist Friendship:

"I find friendship interesting in the building of a feminist ethos because I am interested in bonding among women across differences. Friendship is a kind of practical love that commits one to perceptual changes in the knowledge of other persons. The commitment is there because understanding the other is central to the possibility of loving



Maria Barea and her son Horacio Faudella, cameraman during the filming of *Antuca* (1992).

the other person practically. Practical love is an emotion that involves a commitment to make decisions or act in ways that take the well-being of the other person into account. Because I think a commitment to perceptual changes is central to the possibility of bonding across differences and the commitment is part of friendship, I think that friendship is a good concept to start the radical theoretical and practical reconstruction of the relations among women" (Lugones 1995, 141).

Warmi's politics and practices were a materialization of Lugones' ideal. For example, in *Women of El Planeta* (*Mujeres de El Planeta*, 1981), the two pillars of the project were, first, working in films with migrant rural women, the settlers of Lima's sandbank slums; and second, bringing together a group of dear friends, family and collaborators to work on her films/projects. Both strands were imbued with this kind of Lugonian model. The members of Warmi sought to establish bonds that would allow them to "generate the radical reconstruction of relations" among themselves as a group of filmmakers and also between all of them and the women portrayed in their films. Some trustworthy men, such as the cinematographers Jorge Vignati and César Pérez, and the cultural activist Mark Willens, also shared the safe space of Warmi. These were not women's only spaces, but they were women-led, and this option was based on Barea's previous work experiences, some of which were traumatic.

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The Starving Dogs/Los perros hambrientos is a major film crediting Figueroa as director but Barea's work was largely unacknowledged. She also wanted to find new ways to give silenced women a voice.



Maria Barea.



Barea's background and testimonial methodology

When Warmi was created, Barea was a seasoned filmmaker. She started her career in the 1970s as the producer for her husband, the cusqueño director Luis Figueroa. [6] [open endnotes in new window] They created the small film company Pukara Cine that produced among others *The Starving Dogs (Los perros hambrientos*, 1975) and *Yawar Fiesta* (1979). Besides being Figueroa's producer and Pukara's manager, Barea did uncredited creative work like screenwriting. She soon realized that women were absent in Figueroa's progressive but patronizing representations of the Indigenous peasantry. In addition, her own sensibility was sidelined in her husband's projects. Hence, she started a parallel process of giving herself and other silenced women a voice. This process fostered the agency of all those involved, primarily her. María Barea regularly and openly refers to her own trajectory as a media maker, including her insecurity as a creator and how she relentlessly grew out of it.

After divorcing Figueroa in 1980, she directed her first piece, the documentary *Women of El Planeta* (*Mujeres de El Planeta*, 1981), awarded at the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival (East Germany) in 1983.[7] During the preproduction, she conducted thorough research among and with the female inhabitants of Lima's shantytowns or *pueblos jóvenes* (new towns). Massive migration from the Andean countryside to the cities was Peru's most relevant social phenomenon of the 20th century. The waves of population arriving in the capital were caused by the workforce demanded by the increasing industrialization, the perennial need of servants in middle and upper-class households, and, in the last two decades of the century, the internal armed conflict that forcibly displaced peasant communities. Migrations were accompanied by overcrowding. The increasing demand for living space led to practices of land grabbing commonly known as "invasions." [8]

The eye-opening knowledge Barea acquired thanks to the ethnographical work conducted with the dwellers of the slums was the seed for all the projects she undertook during her career. In the testimonies of the *invasoras*, she found intersectional structural injustice and a solid spirit of overcoming. From that moment on, she felt called to tell their stories, not of victimhood but of collective strength, via the cinematic medium. Barea is a case in point of how the testimonial process works in two directions, emancipating the listener and the speaker. Barea's role models were grass-roots women. She was free from the patronizing gaze that, sometimes, characterized leftist intellectuals wanting to "give voice to the voiceless" in Latin America. Conversely, she carefully listened to the narration of the life journeys of the women of the slums and took advantage of the act of compiling their testimonies to reflect and incorporate changes into her own life and career. The resultant films combine the expressive efforts of women of the working and middle-classes, becoming precious interclass cultural products.

In her work, Barea made use of emotional and intuitive types of thinking committed to action. This is an applied form of creativity, in which the aesthetic form was used to reach transformative goals. This type of creativity invests in visual products that are designed to be usable in a practical communicative and educational way, not purely objects of contemplation. That is also the point of

Grupo Chaski.



Warmi leaflet cover. Click on the image to see the contents and statements of the group's goals.



Maria Barea (right) and Micha Torres (left] featured in an article in Revista Meridiano.

testimony: to convert an intimate encounter between a speaker and a listener—where crucial information about personal, historical, and/or structural abuse is shared—int0 documented material, to foster public awareness that leads into political action.[9]

After the crucial experience of making *Women of El Planeta*, in 1982 Barea founded the Chaski group with Stefan Kaspar, Alejandro Legaspi, Fernando Espinoza and Fernando Barreto. As I have explained elsewhere, her experience in Chaski was disappointing. The group's organizational aspirations—mirroring their emancipatory ideological underpinnings—were to create a horizontal workflow, freed from auteurist hierarchies. However, soon enough, Barea realized that her male colleagues were discriminating against her—a common practice on the Left that she described humorously as *machismo-leninismo*. Although when the group started, she was the member with more experience and international recognition, she was soon relegated to the role of the producer and made responsible for the most painstaking but necessary tasks. At the same time, her ideas were systematically dismissed (Seguí 2018, 27-30). With Chaski she made two films, *Miss Universe in Peru (Miss Universo en el Perú*, 1982) and *Gregorio* (1985). After fulfilling her responsibilities in the distribution of *Gregorio*, Barea was burned-out and left the group.

Founding Warmi Film and Video

In 1989, Barea founded the Warmi group with two other women who had left Chaski for similar reasons, Amelia (Micha) Torres and María Luz Pérez Goicoechea. The three of them appear as the founding members in the statutes of civil association, which also establish the thematic focus of the group's work: women's and children's rights (Statute of Constitution of the Civil Association Warmi Colectivo Cine y Video 1989). Micha Torres has long been working with Barea. She had worked in the international department of Chaski as an assistant to Stefan Kaspar. Torres affirms Chaski's practices of machismo. She affirms, for instance, that she had the idea for the third film of the group about a run-away street girl, *Juliana* (1989), but nobody credited her. (Torres, interview, 2016). In addition to Barea, Torres, and Pérez, Sonia Llosa, Jorge Vignati, Mark Willems, and Lieve Delanoy joined Warmi. [10] They all contributed with small amounts of money to the project. Other friends and relatives were part of the collective, such as the German film curator Gudula Meinzolt, María Barea's son, Horacio Faudella, and her niece, Petruska Barea.

Barea and Torres were to lead, but Barea assumed the manager role because Torres had a regular job in an environmentalist NGO, which allowed her to provide for her family (interview 2016). At that point, Barea and her son already had provided an infrastructure for video editing. Their U-Matic video studio was a bit old-fashioned but still vital in doing autonomous audiovisual production. However, the commercial distribution of video did not create much profit. For that reason, Warmi decided to make a film in 35mm that could be released in cinemas, benefiting from the mandatory exhibition of Peruvian films guaranteed by the national film law.[11] They wanted to do a movie about domestic workers, who in Peru are mostly peasant girls who migrate to the cities (interview September 28, 2016).

Collaboration with the Association of Domestic Workers

Barea met Vittoria Savio in Lima at the end of the 1980s. The Italian aid worker was displaced by internal conflict within her community of residence in the Southern Sierra, a place where she had lived for the previous ten years. [12] Savio



Rosa Dueñas in Women of El Planeta.



Rosa Dueñas in a mass demonstration.

shared Barea's priority of working with the mostly invisible domestic workers, especially the little girls. To understand and document this overlooked kind of human trafficking, they travelled to collect testimonies in peasant communities in the region of Cajamarca. Barea was well acquainted with the area because she had filmed *The Starving Dogs (Los perros hambrientos)*.[13]

Savio and Gudula Meinzolt secured funding from German and Italian NGOs (MLAL - Latin American Movement for Latin America; ASW - Aktionsgemeinschaft Solidarische Welte, Berlin; Terre des Hommes; and Kirchlicher Entwicklungsdienst Bayern). While the funding was European, the local partner for the documentary was the Peruvian association of domestic workers, *Instituto de Promoción y Formación de Empleadas del Hogar* (Institute for the Promotion and Training of Domestic Workers, IPROFOTH). This cinematic alliance had two results, the short video documentary *Because I Wanted to Go to School (Porque quería estudiar* 1990) and *Antuca* (1992), a feature docudrama in 35mm.

In the early 1990s, Cecilia Blondet published studies focusing on women's organizations in *pueblos jóvenes* (new settlements) of the capital city (1990, 1991). She notes that Lima's environment was precarious and conflict ever-present so that for the migrant women, establishing a social presence was a slow, uncertain, and insecure undertaking. It involved negotiation and conciliation and required massive strength and courage. The new social identity of the women settlers was shaped by their individual and collective struggles and by the positions they maintained in facing numerous private and public institutions (Blondet 1990, 12). Collective identity was key to the survival strategies of the migrant women. For that reason, women's organizations play an essential role in Barea's films starting with her first work, *Women of El Planeta*, which features the Aurora Vivar Ladies' Committee and its leader Rosa Dueñas. In the cases of *Because I Wanted to Go to School* and *Antuca*, the organization of domestic workers, IPROFOTH, was also fully involved in the production. As a result, the tie between individuals and support group is crucial in the narrative structure of the films.

Household workers are probably the most isolated and challenging to organize. Most are females who begin their working life as eight- or nine-year-old girls. They live under the domination of adults who make them work without a schedule, salary, or fundamental rights like schooling. Many of them suffer physical and sexual abuse. It is complicated for women raised under that terror regime to find the time and strength to organize themselves and claim their rights, but they do so against all odds. Significantly, at the same time that they depict the harsh living conditions of domestic workers, the two films do not develop a victim discourse. On the contrary, they represent these women as agents and reinforce the idea that household workers can change their living conditions and emancipate themselves through solidarity. However, these were made in the 1990s. Before that time revolutionary dreams had been shattered in Latin America in a two-step strategy, first, by waves of dictatorships and immediately after by neocolonial economic mandates imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In the 90s, these organized workers were not aiming at overthrowing the capitalist system. To them, "emancipation" meant building a straw hut in an illegal settlement with the help of some *comadres* and calling it home, as we witness in the happy but realistic ending of Antuca.



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Screenshot of Gabriela Huayhua's testimony in Because I Wanted to Go to School.



Graciela Huayhua, non-professional lead of *Antuca*, in a newspaper article about the film. Click here to see whole article.

Because I Wanted to Go to School (1990) and Antuca (1992)

Based on testimonies collected in the city and the countryside, Barea and Torres wrote the screenplay for *Antuca*. However, they agreed that the interviews constituted fantastic material and decided to edit a video documentary with the footage. [14] [open endnotes in new window] They called it *Because I Wanted to Go to School* because one of the reasons frequently given by the girls when asked why they left their homes to become maids was that they wanted to go to school. This short film proved useful for the domestic workers association as an educational and awareness-raising tool. The film depicts many children, adolescents, and youngsters with differing environments, work experiences and politicization stages. Furthermore, it portrays the mothers of these child workers, who often are the ones who impotently send them out, unable to feed the family with their meagre earnings as peasants and craftswomen.

From its very name, the video highlights the fact that the girls want to improve themselves. Moreover, many of them had been lured into exploitative work with the promises made by their patrons that they would be sent to study at night while working during the day. Much of the testimony was obtained in one of these night schools in Lima. A focus on the girls' continuous efforts is the film's key message. It underlines the overall aim of Warmi's political work: showing the human value of these migrants both to themselves and to a racist *limeño* society that considers them disposable.

Indeed, the most impressive testimony to the camera gathered in *Because I Wanted to Go to School* is from Graciela Huayhua Collanqui. She shares with the interviewer (Barea) and the spectators her traumatic memory of being an exploited girl, with the lucidity of someone who is no longer one. Thanks to the assistance provided by the association of domestic workers, Huayhua is now a politically trained young woman who understands the systemic causes of her oppression. However, that does not detract her from this pain. Part of her childhood has been robbed and will never be returned.

In an interview with Barea conducted by Gudula Meinzolt, Barea states that a life of forced seclusion creates emotional blockages in the psyches domestic servants. That is one reason why the practice of *testimonio* is used as a healing tool in Latin American political cultures. Overcoming communication impediments and taking the floor, perhaps for the first time, allows the *testimoniante* to move forward in a socially needed way and thus helps to overcome their psychic trauma (Barea and Meinzolt 1992, 19). Furthermore, *testimonio* functions as a mirroring experience. Other women who have experienced the abuse can live a similar catharsis by watching or reading first-person accounts that stand for the entire oppressed collective.

The members of Warmi were so impressed by Huayhua's testimony with its balance between vulnerability and a fierce determination that they decided to offer her the role of Antuca, the protagonist of their docu-fiction film in preparation. This choice fit in with the aesthetic and political reasoning behind selecting a format halfway between documentary and fiction for the film *Antuca*. Barea states they choose not to stray too far from a documentary treatment.[15]



Antuca's pastoral childhood.



After a decade, Antuca returns to her community for the annual festival and meets her childhood sweetheart. Despite the affection, a cultural divide is manifested. She is now an urban girl, a "señorita".



Antuca and her comrade from the Housemaid's association, tourists in Cajamarca, her homeland.

That is why they opted to offer the lead to a non-professional actor, whose life experience was similar to the fictional character's one. This choice of actor provides a robust indexical quality to the film. The script was based on the combination of several life stories. However, many events resonated with Huayhua's biography, helping her leading role in this docudrama.

Using the classical genre of the bildungsroman and a recourse to flashbacks to construct the narrative, Antuca tells the story of a little girl (by the same name) who sees her life changed after the sudden death of her father. As the girl's mother leaves to work in the city, she places Antuca as a servant in her godmother's house.[16] Finally, Antuca ends up in Lima working for her mother's employers. A fellow maid informs Antuca that her mum had died some time ago. Embodying the cruelest side of disposability, Antuca is forced to work in the house where her mother worked and then died. The screenwriters dramatically draw on the slaveowner mentality of the employers in this gesture. However, the traumatic events depicted in the film, far from being poetic license, are based in the testimonies gathered during its preproduction and before. Barea put ten years of research work into the script of the film. For instance, a scene shows the señora of the house brutally cutting Antuca's braids, which symbolize her Indigenous identity, with the excuse that the long hair is unhygienic. Rosa Dueñas, the community leader protagonist of Women of El Planeta, confided this disorienting and cruel experience to Barea years before during the research work for her first documentary.

When the fictional character of Antuca grows up a bit, she leaves this oppressive and dangerous place and starts a journey through a series of households, where she continues to experience a range of abuse. At a certain point, she meets a young woman who is part of the association of domestic workers. Timidly, Antuca starts frequenting their center and learns about her rights while finding solace in the company of other women in the same situation. At a crucial point of the story, she decides to go back to her village to see her family from whom she had been separated. Accompanied by a friend, Antuca returns to the Andean mountains and meets her brother and grandfather. Her childhood sweetheart is now a community leader who works the land and has never thought of emigrating. After the first joy of the encounter with them, Antuca starts feeling alienated. She knows that she does not belong to the village anymore after so many years in the city. Hence, she again decides to part, leaving behind her exclusively Indigenous identity, which is hybrid now. Antuca reencounters the young women in the association, bringing village food and drinks as souvenirs to the city where she now belongs.

The dichotomy between city and countryside is crucial in the film. Antuca is forcibly taken to the capital; however, the different experiences over the years make her change, learn other customs, and finally forget peasant lifestyle and culture. When she returns to her community, she is perceived as an alien. Her identity is conflicted. In the city, she is a "dirty Indian." In the village, she is a señorita—a term used by the peasants with sarcastic class undertones. Both worlds distrust and reject her, yet her life belongs to the city. The organization is her new family. The movie ends with a scene of hope, Antuca and her comrades invading and building a hut made of straw mats in a sandy settlement of Lima. It is the celebration of the conquest of autonomous space. The moral is that although Antuca is still vulnerable, her life belongs to her. She has self-esteem,



Maria Barea acting as as an employer of the maid Antuca.



Friends laughing together in the women's association.

joy, and hope. She has managed to move forward; however, a whole life of struggle lies ahead.

The film functions as a vehicle of expression, perhaps subtle propaganda, of the message transmitted by the association of domestic workers. The film's overall message is that Antuca knows her rights and how to fight. However, it is not a Latin American *macho* militant film. The criticism of society is multi-layered, and the resolution is determined but humble. This kind of contention also affects the narration, such as the slow pace as a formal choice that tries to create an atmosphere that reflects the Andean rhythms and the worldview of the protagonists. There is no euphoria or radical combativeness (Barea and Meinzolt 1992, 21).

The two films, *Because I Wanted to Go to School* and *Antuca*, act as instruments for consciousness-raising with two target groups. First is internally within the group of workers. Barea describes the films as "instruments of liberation" by and for the organized domestic workers (Barea and Meinzolt 1992, 19). At this level, Warmi is helping creating a proletarian public sphere in Peru. Second, both movies, but mainly *Antuca*, were intended to function as awareness-raising tools for the social class to which the members of Warmi belong: the urban middle class.

The narrative follows Antuca through a series of households, suggesting a taxonomy of femininity in Peru through the variegated spectrum of mistresses that take advantage of the peasant girl. She works for cruel bourgeois women, who do not let her go to school and turn a blind eye when their children or husbands harass her sexually. Other patrons are racist and frivolous, but not cruel. She even finds some that treat her with respect, like a sex worker who originally was a low-class person but has opted to use her sexual capital for upward social mobility in a calculated move. Or the feminist university lecturer who helps Antuca in her education, including her sexual education. Thus, through Antuca, we take a tour of the lives of middle-class urban women, and we also receive information about their oppression in a misogynistic society. The two bourgeois women are immoral, but they are not free. Their husbands deceive them, and they live in a situation of dependence. However, independent women such as the sex worker or the leftwing university lecturer cannot live fully either because of their difficult moral or economic fit in a patriarchal society. [17]

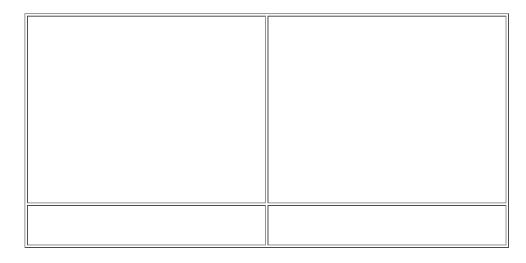


Antuca's conclusion: creating a new settlement together outside Lima.



A precarious life but also a move toward collaboration and a kind of independence.

Antuca makes the case for a new approach to solidarity among women to overcome class and race discrimination. Portraying the middle-class with sophistication, Warmi offers an analysis that shows the power imbalance in the highly stratified Peruvian society, which is almost a caste system where the sexual division of labor and the absence of value assigned to domestic chores generates



the cruelest woman-by-woman exploitation, only to reinforce the patriarchal structures that exploit them all. *Antuca* is a cry of empathy and liberation addressed to female employers, who in Peru, due to the meager price of the domestic labor, are legion.[18] Sadly, the film never enjoyed massive theatrical release because Law 19,327 was abolished when the production was finishing. Neither the Warmi collective nor Barea alone would have another opportunity to undertake a feature film.

Warmi's last finished project: Daughters of War (1998)

In 1997, Barea received a commission for an episode in the series *Girls Around the World* (1998), produced by Brenda Parkerson. This is a collection of six documentaries on a diverse group of 17-year-old girls from across the globe. The different episodes are made by women filmmakers from Benin, Germany, Finland, Pakistan, China, and Peru. The series aims to provide a critical crosscultural perspective into the lives of young women as they transition into adulthood, targeting young Western women as the audience.

Warmi's proposal was *Daughters of War* (*Hijas de la Violencia*, 1998), a film that touches on the lives of a very particular type of girl, gang members in Ayacucho. [19] The character-led documentary focuses on Gabriela del Pilar Bendezú Flores, an orphan whose mother was among the thousands of innocent civilians killed during the bloody internal conflict in Peru. This situation drove her to the streets, where thousands of children, raised in the same violence, gathered in gangs that reproduced this violent behavior. *Daughters of War* offers a raw portrait of these gangs of teenagers through poignant re-enactments of their criminal activities, fighting, and binges.

In this film, Barea takes to the extreme her empathic capacity when gathering the protagonist's testimony. She admits to having contacted Bendezú after accessing her judicial files thanks to a journalist friend's tip—this gives a glimpse of the lack of protection that juvenile offenders had when the film was made. Bendezú and her sister have been living with their paternal grandparents since an early age.





Close-up of Gabriela Pilar Bendezú.







Reenacting a party, children became unhinged.



Bendezú feeding her baby.



Traditional floral floor decorations on the square

The lack of love and the permanent abuse they endure at the hands of family members in their early life, and the subsequent killing of their mother, mark Pilar traumatically. The problems start when the father abandons the family and the mother, to make ends meet, establishes herself as a settler in the rainforest, unable to bring their children to the remote region. However, she visits the girls in town whenever her activities allow her to do so. But one day, she is assassinated—just another innocent peasant victim of the internal armed conflict.

The approach used by the film to explain the devastating consequences of war in the lives of Peruvian children is subjective. There is no voice of God narration. The focus is on the unexplained and unexplainable suffering of the children and their violent reaction to it. The documentary does not take the side of the military or the Shining Path, apportioning blame equally on both groups, which was a bold approach in that particular moment. However, the description of the overall context is not explicit; the mix of talking-heads footage and the extreme reenactments staged by the gang members is at the same time intimate and uncanny.

The reconstruction of Gabriela's terrible childhood is done using the testimonies of the grandfather and the sister and a few family photos. The story told by Gabriela's sister—older and more balanced, who has managed to remain connected with her emotions despite the constant abuse—is intertwined with the protagonist's testimony, who remains alienated from her feelings because of the trauma. For that reason, the oral account by the sister is key to reconstructing her story. She describes how the series of violent events made Gabriela change, hardening her heart and driving her to join a gang of lost girls like herself. Together, they drink, consume drugs, and commit minor crimes. Gabriela, unruly and desperate, behaves this way for some years until she is detained and processed, condemned and sent off to jail. Subsequently, after her release, she becomes pregnant with her daughter.

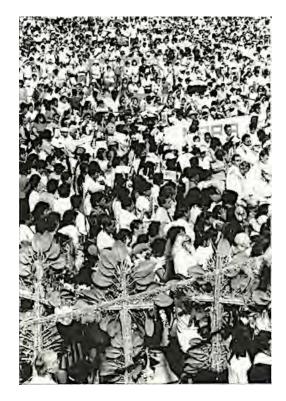
After the information about the past provided by the sister, the narration confronts us with Gabriela's testimony. As an experience for the viewer, those two testimonies are at odds. At the moment of the filming, Gabriela is not a desperate child or rebel adolescent but a taciturn (or depressed) young woman, focused on raising her baby daughter and surviving in a menacing environment. For Barea, an experienced interviewer and a careful listener, the subject of the interview is challenging. It has been rare to hear even a word out of her mouth in the previous films during the interviews. However, Gabriela Benzedú is so sparing with words that Barea needs to include the entire dialogue, without editing out the questions, to make sense of the answers. We hear the voice of the filmmaker out of focus asking: "What saddens you?" Gabriela responds, just shaking her head. Barea then asks: "What gives you joy?" The girl answers: "Nothing. Only my baby." This statement is followed by a photograph of a fifteen-year-old Gabriela embracing her newborn baby. The baby girl is maybe the only element of hope in the entire film. However, there is a permanent suspicion that extreme violence will emerge suddenly and somehow affect the baby too, as it affects everybody else in this haunted region.

In the collective sequences, Barea invited Ayacuchan boys and girls, actual members of gangs, to re-enact their criminal activities on the street and perform in their gathering spaces. She admits that, often, things got out of hand. For instance, in one scene, although the idea was to shoot a re-enactment of a party—with a fake buzz and phony squabbling—the kids ended up bringing actual alcohol and organizing a melee. The result is spine-chilling, like a window open to a universe characterized by mayhem and unrestrained violence. Moreover, in contrast with the other films analyzed here, there is no clear message of self-overcoming, empowerment, or hope. The psychological consequences of the

of Huamanga.



Burial of Maria Elena Moyano



Burial of Maria Elena Moyano

internal armed conflict in the inhabitants of the Ayacucho region are so heart-breaking that it leaves the witnessing audience speechless. The war between the State and the Shining Path has killed the soul of its most vulnerable victims. A hard-working, well-meaning Spanish catholic nun appears in the movie's second part bringing a discourse that could potentially convey hope. Still, her point of view ends up looking simplistic—a foreign kind of faith amid so much devastation and senselessness.

Concluding with an unfinished film

The Warmi group stopped producing films at the turn of the century not due to the lack of ideas or willingness but lack of funding. In 1992, the advantageous film law, the Decree 19,327 promulgated in 1972 by the revolutionary-military regime of Juan Velasco Alvarado, was derogated. Consequently, *Antuca*—which was made having in mind a protectionist law that guaranteed the theatrical release of all Peruvian productions—was never released commercially and was only distributed via alternative circuits with not enough profit to fund a subsequent film. From that moment onward, surviving was a struggle. They worked ondemand when the opportunity came, such as in *Daughters of War*, and that was it

Little known is the fact that the first project that the Warmi group wrote and tried to fund is a feature fiction called *Rocío y los pollitos* (Rocío and the chicks). This ambitious drama was set in Villa El Salvador, one of the most vanguardist slums of the city. This *pueblo joven* started with a land take over in the zone of La Tablada de Lurín, in 1971. The government of the revolutionary military regime of General Juan Velasco Alvarado supported the invaders and decided to try and build an experimental "model town." The Catholic church also played an aiding role in this utopian project. As a result, the Self-managed Urban Community Villa El Salvador (Comunidad Urbana Autogestionaria Villa el Salvador, CUAVES) was created in 1973. Women's organizations thrived particularly in this context. In time, they got centralized in the Popular Women's Federation of Villa El Salvador (Federación Popular de Mujeres de Villa El Salvador, FEPOMUVES), which, by 1990, had ten thousand members and eight hundred leaders (Blondet 1991,13).

Warmi's film project *Rocío y los pollitos* was set in the transforming reality of Villa El Salvador around 1990. The background themes were women's and children's rights, but the storytelling had more literary elements than any other film by Warmi. The narrative's novelty, which uses Indigenous myths to generate a story focused on the subjectivity of a little migrant girl and her mother, would have been a neat contribution to the thematic and formal diversification of Peruvian cinema at a time. Other features make it remarkable, such as the participation of the theatre group Yuyachkani, or that one of the characters is based on the Afro-Peruvian community leader María Elena Moyano (assassinated by the Shining Path in 1992, during the preproduction of the film). In any case, we only have the paper records of this project, and some oral history, to fantasize about its realization. [20]

I shall end on a circular movement with this unfinished movie because it was the first and last of Warmi's projects. The effort they put into it and the fact that it was never made epitomizes the struggles of the cinematic group and the migrant women settlers, the dwellers of Lima's outskirts. These women of Indigenous origin have fought until today for recognition while sustaining the life of the Hispanic capital of Peru. This is not a metaphor. Migrant women of the popular classes and their descendants clean the city's homes and streets, feed and take care of its inhabitants, stimulate the economy, participate in politics—at all levels, from grassroots to the nation's parliament—and still, their contributions go severely unrecognized. They suffer permanently from racism, classism and

sexism. Moreover, the Peruvian political reality is becoming increasingly conflictual, in consonance with the extreme polarization of political positions worldwide. In these appalling times, it would be good to go back to the utopian ideal of pluralist friendship preconized by María Lugones and embodied in Warmi's films and María Elena Moyano's leadership and sacrifice, which was not in vain. The three Marías—Lugones, Moyano, and Barea—are ethical points of reference. Interclass alliances come both from practical love and creative self-criticism. A feminist, situated, committed film scholarship can be a humble ally in these processes, too.

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Qué es Warmi

Fundada en julio de 1989, constituye el primer colectivo de mujeres en el campo audiovisual. Haciendo suya la presencia de las mujeres en la historia del quehacer cinematográfico nacional, rescata sus experiencias, anhelos y frustraciones intentando propiciar un espacio abierto a la creatividad femenina. Con ello esperamos aportar en la ardua gesta del cine nacional por salir adelante, remontando las dificultades económicas y técnicas. Nos es común la búsqueda de un lenguaje propio que traduzca en imágenes nuestra compleja realidad nacional y el afán de expresarnos como realizadoras.

Objetivos

- Contribuir a través del cine, video y otros medios de comunicación social, con elementos de reflexión crítica sobre nuestro país y continente.
- Investigar y producir obras de cine, video y otros medios afines. Asimismo propiciar talleres de capacitación y el intercambio de experiencias.
- Fomentar la activa participación de las mayorías en los procesos de creación, producción, realización, distribución y difusión alternativa de los medios audiovisuales.
- Relievar el rol de la mujer en los procesos sociales, a través de realizaciones con diferentes énfasis temáticos relativos a la mujer y a la infancia.
- A través de nuestras realizaciones, colaborar a la integración científico-cultural de América Latina. Asimismo, fomentar la reflexión y educación sobre la conservación del medio ambiente y el uso racional de nuestros recursos naturales.

Qué hacemos

Investigación

Planteada como sustento indispensable de la producción, sea de cine o video. Posibilita una sintesis válida sobre un conjunto de problemáticas, que luego se transforma en guión, en estructura dramática, en documental, ficción o animación. Es la fibra con la que tejeremos como otras mujeres su telar o arpillera.

Producción

Eje de nuestro trabajo grupal y donde se concentra nuestro esfuerzo. Se trata de la producción de cine y cine o video para televisión, diseño y producción de programas de televisión. Diseño y producción de módulos educativos en animación por computadora. La temática: mujer, niños, historia y tradiciones, medio ambiente y desarrollo, educación y cultura.

Promoción y educación audiovisual

Es la difusión de materiales de cine y video sobre diferente temática. Trabajo diseñado como un servicio con apoyo al trabajo de grupos organizados, instituciones educativas, religiosas, culturales y de promoción del desarrollo y dirigido a grupos poblacionales de base y a grupos de interés focal.

Es también propiciar talleres de capacitación de promotores en el uso y/o confección de medios audiovisuales, así como la autocapacitación y los encuentros de especialización técnica para productores de videos populares.







JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

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Notes

- 1. The internal armed conflict between the Peruvian State and the Shining Path lasted from 1980 to 2000. In 2003, the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission stated that almost 70,000 people died or disappeared as a result of the conflict. [return to page 1]
- 2. A paradigmatic example of this mixture is Ricardo Bedoya's book *100 años de cine en el Perú: Una historia crítica*. Lima: Universidad de Lima, 1992.
- 3. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/spanish-english/ningunear.
- 4. This article is based on an oral history work that has been going on since 2015 when I first met María Barea almost by chance in the context of my research on the Ukamau group. My communications with Barea have taken many forms over the years: semi-structured interviews, informal conversations (in person, online, or on the phone), emails, WhatsApp messages. Due to the nature of my dialogic research methodology, based on creating an emotional bond with the subjects of my research, the information gathered is not going to be referenced with scientific exactitude on every occasion. A previous result of this ongoing research is a chapter of my doctoral thesis *Andean Women's Oppositional Filmmaking: On and Off-Screen Practices and Politics* devoted to María Barea. Some of its content, mostly referring to her work as a producer in mixed gender teams, appears in my article "Auteurism, Machismo-Leninismo, and Other Issues: Women's Labor in Andean Oppositional Film Production." *Feminist Media Histories* 4.1 (2018): 11–36.
- 5. The theoretical framework of this research is informed by Anglophone histories

- of women's documentary filmmaking written by scholars such as Julia Lesage (1978), Alexandra Juhasz (1994), Patricia Zimmermann (1999), and Shilyh Warren (2019).
- 6. She can also be described as a creative servant if we make use of the term "creative service" coined by Erin Hill meaning a series of roles "cohering around their most essential shared function: serving creative work by subtracting all noncreative work from the process." (Hill 2016, 134). [return to page 2]
- 7. This was part of the series of five episodes *As Women See It*, produced by Faust Films (Munich, Germany), which includes *Selbe et tant d'autres* by Safi Faye; *Sudesha* by Deepa Dhanraj, *Bread and Dignity: Open letter from Nicaragua* by María José Álvarez and *Permissible Dreams* by Atiat El-Abnoudi.
- 8. See Jürgen Golte and Norma Adams. *Los caballos de troya de los invasores:* estrategias campesinas en la conquista de la gran Lima. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1987.
- 9. About her political position, Barea describes her younger self as "ignorant in political issues." She was close to leftist organisations (such as *Vanguardia Revolucionaria*) and participated in Marxist reading groups, and all the cenacles of leftist intellectuals and wannabe filmmakers. However, like many women, she did not participate with an authoritative voice in these meetings, yet she was actively engaged in logistics and other types of feminized labor (Interview September 17, 2016).
- 10. Peruvians Sonia Llosa and Jorge Vignati were experimented filmmakers. Vignati is one of Peru's most prominent cinematographers. Belgians Mark Willens and Lieve Delanoy worked for the Antoon Spinoy Foundation, which managed a theatre in Andahuaylas. The couple created an exciting bilingual cultural project to promote national films, plays, and music. In Belgium, Willems had been part of the solidarity organisation Liberation Films (distributors of Ukamau in Europe among other collectives). Delanoy is part of the theatre group Yuyachkani.
- 11. The Decree Law 19,327 was promulgated by the government of Juan Velasco Alvarado in 1972 and derogated by Alberto Fujimori in 1992. One of its most striking features was the guaranteed theatrical exhibition of Peruvian films, which undoubtedly helped foster film production in the country for twenty years.
- 12. María Barea's last film project, *Mamacha*, is a documentary devoted to Vittoria Savio's life and legacy, the Yanapanakusun center in Cusco. It has not been released.
- 13. (*Los perros hambrientos*. Dir: Luis Figueroa: Prod: María Barea, 1975) and also the ethnographic video *Porcón: Palm Sunday*(*Porcón: Domingo de Ramos*, María Barea, 1989/92).
- 14. The three films analysed in this article are available on YouTube in their original version without subtitles. [return to page 3]
 - Porque quería estudiar: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMS-rV9Yx6c
 - Antuca: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYFXdA_xj_Q
 - Hijas de la violencia: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qIXo5Bflzs
- 15. Barea admits that if they had had a bigger budget, they would have included more fictional elements in the scenes located in the countryside (Barea and Meinzolt 1992, 20).
- 16. In the Andean culture the figures of the godmother and godfather are part of a clientelist system of social relations. The people in the villages are related not

necessarily by kinship but other bonds of servitude to *madrinas* or *padrinos*, who live in provincial towns.

- 17. At the end of the 1970s two important books containing testimonies of Peruvian women were published: Esther Andradi and Ana María Portugal, *Ser mujer en el Perú* (Lima: Mujer y Autonomía, 1977); and Maruja Barrig, *Cinturón de castidad.La mujer de clase media en el Perú* (Lima: Mosca Azul, 1979).
- 18. For a sharp analysis of the contradictions of Peruvian white feminists who perpetuate the exploitation, both material and symbolic, of the Indigenous domestic workers see Maruja Barrig, *El mundo al revés: imágenes de la Mujer Indígena, 2001.*
- 19. Barea affirms that Warmi Cine y Video does not appear as producer in the credits of *Daughters of War* due to an imposition of the ZDF, the German broadcaster that commissioned the film. WhatsApp communication 2021. I opted to include it anyway because Warmi consider it part of their corpus of works.
- 20. For more information on *Rocío y los pollitos*, see a chapter of mine in the collection *Undone. The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Films*, edited by Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon. University of California Press, 2023 (in press).

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Women's Film Project: an international collective in the career of Helena Solberg

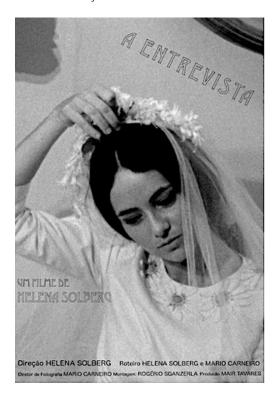
by Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco

translated by Bethany Parham



International Women's Film Project (New York, 1977) (Helena Solberg archive).

In the past decade, studies on women's cinema/women in cinema have gained new momentum. This phenomenon has been observed in various places around the world and has led to the "discovery" of Helena Solberg in her own country. Prior to the publication of the thesis *Helena Solberg: Trajetória de uma documentarista brasileira* (Tavares) [*Helena Solberg: the career of a Brazilian documentary-maker*] and Solberg's retrospective exhibition at the 2014 festival É *Tudo verdade*, the director was relatively unknown in Brazil, even amongst cinema enthusiasts and academics. Now comprehensive analyses, both Brazilian and international, have been published on Helena Solberg, including, among other works: "This Woman which is One: Helena Solberg-Ladd's *The Double Day*" (Foster); "The Migrant in Helena Solberg's Carmen Miranda: *Bananas is my Business*" (Félix); "Cineastas brasileñas que filmaron la revolución: Helena Solberg y Lucia Murat" (Tedesco) [Female Brazilian filmmakers who filmed the

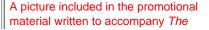


Poster for A Entrevista (Helena Solberg archive).

revolution: Helena Solberg and Lucia Murat]; and "Intersectionalidade em *The emerging woman* (1974)" (Holanda) [Intersectionality in *The emerging woman*].

Here I wish to contribute to the research on Helena Solberg through a further exploration of the Women's Film Project (WFP), which was later expanded and renamed the International Women's Film Project (IWFP). It was the only collective to which Solberg belonged throughout her career, and it was unique for several reasons. Based in the United States, the collective distinguished itself from others not only due to its commitment to internationalism, but also because the role of directing was assigned to a woman from the Third World. Moreover, I intend to expand the studies on the pioneering feminist cinemas in/of Latin America, particularly in their collective forms. To accomplish this, I consider several relevant aspects of Helena Solberg's life prior to moving to the United States. I address the collective's formation and changes, its principal members and the first three films that Solberg produced under its name (known as the feminist trilogy). My focus then turns to a discussion on collective production as I examine Helena Solberg's perspective on the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics within the WFP/IWFP. In addition to written sources, I will draw on films, interviews, photographs and notes from the time.







Collective planning for *The Emerging Woman* (Helena Solberg archive).





Crew of *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny*. These crews were mainly composed of women.

Who was the Helena Solberg that moved to the United States?

image to see more]

Born in 1938, Helena Solberg studied at Sacre Coeur de Jesus College in Rio de Janeiro, which was attended by girls from upper-middle class families. Despite receiving a good education, she was brought up during a time of traditional gender roles, which dictated that a woman's life should be dedicated to getting married and having children (Tavares). Contrary to her family's expectations, the future director surprised everyone with her desire to continue her studies at the university level. She attended the Neo-Latin Languages course at Pontificia Universidade Católica (PUC) in Rio de Janeiro, where she met Davi Neves, Arnaldo Jabor, Cacá Diegues, amongst others who would become key members of the Brazilian film movement known as Cinema Novo. However, her own association with Cinema Novo is questionable for various reasons. Primarily, her first short films, produced in Brazil, do not have a strong thematic, aesthetic or stylistic affinity with those associated with the 1960s movement. Moreover, the members of Cinema Novo never acknowledged her as one of their own, as it was known to be a club for "The Fellers" (an exclusive group for men from the cartoon Little Lulu). On several occasions, the filmmaker herself has spoken about the patronizing attitudes that she faced from her male friends—though her contacts were something she took advantage of to facilitate her own projects. Nonetheless, it was within this group that she became a reporter for the newspaper OMetropolitano (a newspaper funded by student organizations), progressed into filmmaking, and assembled the team for her debut work: A entrevista (1966) [The Interview]. Furthermore, it was at this newspaper that she met Affonso Beato,



Christina Burril, Affonso Beato's camera assistant, is on the right side of the picture. (Helena Solberg archive).



Alfonso Beato did camera on *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny*. Solberg worked with these two camerawomen. Jane Stubbs [on the left] did camerawork and editing on *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny*. Camerawoman Christina Burril is on right. (Helena Solberg archive).

who would shoot *The Double Day* (Helena Solberg, 1975) some years later.

While she belonged to the same generation as the names mentioned above, Helena Solberg's career took longer to get off the ground. In an interview with Julianne Burton, the filmmaker stated that after working for *O Metropolitano*, she married (which was a big event in a woman's life at that time in Brazil) and subsequently had her first child. At that point, she began to realize that the development of her career would differ to that of her male friends. They also had just had children, yet fatherhood did not prevent them from filming nor travelling as childcare was the responsibility of their wives.

After directing *A entrevista* (1966) and *Meio-dia* (1970) [Midday], Solberg moved to the United States in 1971 for the second time, accompanying her husband and two children (since her husband was from the United States, the couple had already stayed there for a period of time a few years before). In conventional terms, as societal norms demanded, by becoming a wife and a mother, she had fulfilled her gender role. However, the director wanted more—something that had been made clear in her short film *A entrevista*. In the same interview with Burton, Solberg said,

"That personal crisis [the frustration of being just a wife and a mother, as well as realizing that your career would be different because you are a woman] provoked my first film, a documentary called *A entrevista* [...]. I interviewed between seventy and eighty women who had the same upper-middle-class background as I did. [...] I went around to different houses with a questionnaire. I asked about their aspirations during adolescence and about their attitudes toward two critical decisions: whether to go to the university, and whether to get married. [...] Despite their comfortable economic and social situation, these women were very, very unhappy. Though they were quite bright, they weren't able to envision much of a future for themselves. Their lack of options left them with a sense of hopelessness and futility" (82-83).

It was in the United States that the director first encountered a structured feminist movement. According to Ceiça Ferreira, the feminist movement was at its height in the United States, which included everything from awareness-raising groups to Women's Studies in the universities (11). Solberg was fascinated by such ebullience; she wanted to understand everything that she was seeing and what had led to this historic moment. Thus, given that cinema was her form of expression, she chose to make a documentary to investigate the new reality in which she found herself. Ferreira also noted that producing a film (which was called The Emerging Woman) on the history of feminism in the United States within a female collective was, for Solberg, a very rich experience, since her previous films were made following traditional modes of production, where the hierarchy is greater and the division of labor fixed (11). Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that Helena Solberg joined this movement with a background of her own. In addition to her analyses on the condition of women from her social class (presented through her talks and in *A entrevista*), she had interviewed Simone de Beauvoir for O Metropolitano and read Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963). These are authors that she keeps in her library to this day.



Solberg's preference for a largely women's crew was unusual at the time.



Originally named the Women's Film Project, the collective was initially composed of Helena Solberg, Lorraine Gray, Melanie Maholick and Roberta Haber. Maholick and Haber were academics studying the history of feminism in the United States at George Washington University. Solberg met the pair through an advertisement in the university's department of Women's Studies. She met Gray, who was at the time a still photographer with some experience in film, during May Day protests.

The WFP's first production is *The Emerging Woman* (1974), in which Helena Solberg is credited as director, Roberta Haber and Melanie Maholick for research and script, Lorraine Gray for photography and Jane Stubbs (who already had experience in the making of films) as editor. However, in the first slide following the opening title, the film is credited to Solberg, Haber, Maholick and Gray; it is not until the end that the division of the aforementioned roles becomes explicit. I will address below how this was a collective work with defined and credited roles and the way in which this was presented to the public through image and sound.

The 40-minute documentary was put together in chronological order and had an





Christina Burril did camerawork and editing on *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny*. (Helena Solberg archive).



A poster for *The Double Day* (Helena Solberg archive).

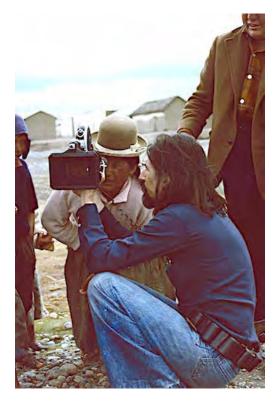
informative purpose. In the film there are hundreds of images, including photographs, engravings, drawings and moving pictures. The sound is non-diegetic. Different voices bring context to the women's struggles. It also features iconic speeches from various women who helped construct the feminist movement. More details of the process are seen in one of the promotional materials for *The Emerging Woman* that circulated at the time.

This promotional material emphasizes that the medium-length film was a collective effort by the WFP, that had required one year of archival research by its members, in addition to the six months of filming, editing and recording of the voices and soundtrack. The same promotion material states that the premiere took place on May 1, 1974, and from then on, the documentary's successful circulation began. In addition to exhibitions and festivals, the production made the selection for the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission and sold around 400 copies in 16mm format to schools, universities and libraries. Moreover, the team was invited to visit the White House (Tavares 52). In an interview with Mariana Tavares, Helena Solberg stated that *The Emerging Woman* was, for her, a watershed moment because up to that point, there had not been anything that established her position as a filmmaker in the United States. In fact, upon demonstrating her ability to narrate a piece of the United States' history, which the people of the United States themselves had never encountered, doors began to open (52).

According to Solberg's interview with Burton, it was inevitable that during the process of *The Emerging Woman* she would draw parallels with the situation of Latin American women—or, in her words, the other side of the coin. Her issues as a Latin American woman, albeit a white upper-class Latin American woman that lived in one of the country's largest cities, were somewhat distinct. As a result, it was proposed that the collective's next film would relate to Latin American women. And so the ideas for *The Double Day* (1975) were born.

In an interview Iconducted in April 2021, Helena Solberg explained that, whilst there had not been a conscious decision to have a female team during the production of *The Emerging Woman*, the opposite was true in the production of *The Double Day*. She believed that the topic and the characters to be interviewed called for this approach, and she understood the impact that a film made with a female camera operator and sound technician would have. Speaking about the impact, she admitted that when all the women came onto the shooting location carrying the equipment, it caused a commotion; no one had ever seen a team composed almost exclusively by women. In an interview in 1976 with the iconic feminist publication *Off Our Backs*, Solberg judged that she had been right. Many people had commented that it was surprising to see Latin American women speaking so much and, in her opinion, having a production team of women was fundamental for this. If the barriers such as class, race, amongst others were already obstructing communication between the women themselves, having an extensive male presence on set would have inhibited this even more.

The small team that would travel around Latin America for approximately three months was, of course, made up of women from the IWFP. The collective adopted this new name as it had expanded beyond the four original members and was joined by members of other nationalities, even though this was just for short periods at a time. Lisa Jackson, who had studied cinema in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was responsible for sound; Dolores Neuman, already a photographer and activist whose photographs had been used in *The Emerging Woman*, was one of the still photographers; and Jane Stubbs, who had been an editor in *The Emerging Woman*, is credited as a producer, but also took on the role of camera assistant at certain points.



Affonso Beato during the filming of *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny* (Helena Solberg archive).



Helena Solberg filming *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny* (Helena Solberg archive).

A problem arose with the cinematography, which is still one of the areas of filmmaking that suffers the greatest under-representation of women. This was Solberg's first filming trip; it was a long and demanding journey on which she had to shoot on film without the conditions for developing and viewing the material. Faced with this issue, the filmmaker chose to call on the only man that become involved in the team: Affonso Beato. As I have already mentioned, Beato had worked as a photographer for *O Metropolitano*. A good friend of Solberg, he had been living in New York and had filmed, amongst other productions, the iconic *O Dragão da Maldade Contra o Santo Guerreiro* (Glauber Rocha, 1969) [The Evil Dragon against the Holy Warrior].

Technically, Solberg was in safe hands with Beato, but as she indicated in an interview, she was not satisfied as she had been unable to fulfil her initial idea for a team made entirely of women. Consequently, the pair began to search for a woman that could at least take on the role of camera assistant and, via a recommendation, they found Christine Burrill. Although they did not know her, they had watched some of her work and were aware that she had lived in Brazil and so ultimately they chose her. However, they only became acquainted properly in Mexico during the first stages of filming for The Double Day. The director remembers how Beato was apprehensive to have an assistant that he did not know, especially in the conditions of this shoot, but she affirmed that the two became great friends and that occasionally Burrill even operated the camera. Burrill, who came to be a permanent part of Helena Solberg's life, is credited as the second camera operator and one of the editors of the documentary (the other was Suzanne Fenn, who had already worked as an assistant editor since around 1970). It is also worth highlighting, that Melanie Maholick, who also worked in The Emerging Woman, is credited as assistant editor.

Many other women contributed to *The Double Day* at various stages, but I deal with this later in the article. For now, I shall turn the attention to its synopsis and circulation. *The Double Day* is a 53-minute production which compiles interviews with women from four different countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico and Venezuela). The women in the documentary come from diverse backgrounds, from rural areas, cities, and different classes. This panorama gives insight into the double oppression of working women, as well as the enormous inequalities between the Latin American women themselves (although this aspect is not addressed directly in the narration).

The documentary was well received at festivals, including the International Film Festival Mannheim-Heidelberg, the American Film Festival and the International Film Festival of India. It enjoyed successful distribution in the United States, albeit less so than *The Emerging Woman*. Moreover, it was widely shown in Latin American militant feminist circles, especially in countries where the team had filmed. In a debate Helena Solberg described:

"I went to film another film in Bolivia, and I was filming an interview with a *chola* [...] and she suddenly spoke to me, she said *"la doble jornada"* [the double day, in English]. And I said: "where did you hear about that?" And she said, "don't you know the film?" [Laughs] It was my film, she didn't know, but she knew the film really well. She said that the film was a film that they used in the union."



Helena Solberg filming *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny* (Helena Solberg archive).

It is also important to highlight that *The Double Day* premiered in Mexico at the opening of the United Nations' First World Conference on Women in 1975. The tight deadline for editing and finishing the vast amount of material resulted in the production of the final film in Solberg's feminist trilogy: *Simplemente Jenny* (1977) [Simply Jenny]. According to Solberg's interview with Burton, she had intended that *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny* would comprise a single production. This documentary would have addressed the issues of Latin American women from different approaches; the first more theoretical and grounded in feminist Marxism (what ultimately came to be *The Double Day*), and the second more poetic.

In Simplemente Jenny we are introduced to the stories of three teenage girls (Jenny, Patricia and Marli) who have been victims of sexual violence and exploitation and are in a Bolivian reformatory. Their journeys stand in stark contrast to the romantic ideals and widespread gender roles of society, and despite not being presented with those fantasied opportunities, these are still ideas that fill their dreams. The film presents a critique of the portrayal of women in religion and the cultural industry. Whereas the issue of religion features more heavily in A Entrevista, in Simplemente Jenny there is greater emphasis on the influence of advertising, media representations, and unreachable beauty standards set for the overwhelming majority of Bolivian women. In one of the promotional materials for Simplemente Jenny, Christine Burrill appears as the sole editor. However, in the credits of the film itself several women appear having been involved in the editing process: Burrill is credited as editor, Grady Watts for the final editing, Melanie Maholick as editing assistant, and the Brazilian Rose Lacreta for additional editing. This is important to note, because it attests to the collective dimension of this crucial aspect of film production. The participation of Lacreta and other Brazilians will be discussed in the next section of the article. The documentary, which is around 30 minutes in length, was premiered in the American Film Festival, in 1978, and was selected for festivals in Jamaica, Leipzig, and in the George Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1979 as well as being shown on television in the United States and on alterative circuits.

Considering the overview of the three productions presented, several points become clear. First, there is evidence that certain roles are repeatedly performed by some professionals and secondly, it is obvious that the WFP/IWFP plays an important role in the productions' viability at all levels (whether that be for training, or for funding).[1] [open endnotes in new window] Therefore, I shall provide a deeper discussion into the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics of the WFP/IWFP.

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The creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics of the IWFP

After a short prologue of no more than a minute, a woman's hand is seen taking a portrait of a woman from a box containing several other pictures. Zoom in, the image freezes. The film's title *The Emerging Woman* appears over this photograph.



Next, we see a photograph of four women sitting around a table talking. On the table there are other photographs, a reel of film and a typewriter. The audience can deduce who these women are from the titleswhich read: a film by Roberta Haber, Melanie Maholick, Lorraine Gray, Helena Solberg-Ladd. [2] [open endnotes in new window] The soundtrack accompanying the sequence starts to mix with the voices of the women producing the documentary. Meanwhile, the audience observes the women watching materials on the Moviola, typing, preparing films for viewing, shooting scenes, and selecting images. Then, from the portrait held in the woman's hand, the narrative returns to the struggles of women. It is not until the end of the documentary that more credits appear, accompanied by the soundtrack; we see quick shots of Gray, Haber, Maholick, Solberg and of the editor Jane Stubbs. Then, the rest of the credits appear on black background.

I chose to open this section with a quick description of the credits in *The Emerging Woman* because it gives important clues about the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics within the WFP. This is a collective production in its authorship and the decision to highlight this aspect at the beginning of the documentary emphasizes its importance in deciding the division of roles. This also occurs in *The Double Day*, which shares interviews with women discussing their difficulties in accessing work in factories, barriers to education and how working as a maid is their only option. Following this, *The Double Day's* marration begins providing information on Latin America, while on screen there are scenes from the *making of*: the team travelling and a woman on the camera giving instructions. The image freezes, the narration stops, and the titles read: "Proyecto Internacional de Cine Feminino S.A" [International Project of Women's Cinema S.A]. The following names are displayed: Joy Galane, who was









already working as filmmaker at the time; Odile Hellier, a French feminist; Melanie Maholick; Mercedes Naveiro, an Argentinean artist who was living in the United States at the time; Dolores Neuman; Anna Maria Sant'Anna, a Brazilian friend of Solberg also living in the United States; Helena Solberg Ladd e Jane Stubbs.

A woman [Helena Solberg] is seen in the back corner of the screen, while another woman looks at the camera display [Christine Burrill]. The title reads "second camera operator Christine Burrill." The camera follows a woman [Lisa Jackson] as she walks with sound equipment. The camera reaches the face of Brazilian filmmaker Ana Carolina, from the trilogy Mar de Rosas (1977) [Sea of Roses], Das Tripas Coração (1982) [Heart and Guts] and Sonho de Valsa (1987) [Dream Waltz]. The titles read: "Production manager, sound editor Jane Stubbs. Assistant editor Joy Galane." In the same shot, the camera returns to the woman with the sound equipment and another woman [Jane Stubbs] appears from within a car. A woman [Solberg] gives instruction to another [Burrill], both close to the camera. The title reads "Director Helena Solberg Ladd." A woman [Ana Carolina] takes still photographs with a photography camera covering her face. The title reads"Photographer Dolores Neuman." The same woman [Jackson] that is seen with sound equipment records the voice of a possible interviewee. The title reads"Sound Lisa Jackson." A man [Affonso Beato] holds a light meter with a woman [Solberg] in the background. The title reads "Cinematographer Affonso Beato." In this shot the credits appear and in the subsequent scene, the audience is shown scenery as the soundtrack begins and the title of the film appears.

Although in this case they had chosen to credit those that were on the team, the first information that the audience receives is that the film was produced by the IWFP and who its members were at that moment. Even some not-so-important roles in the conventional filmmaking hierarchy were also credited at the beginning, performed by women who were part of the filming trip. It is very significant to show the team (which, as I have already remarked, were mostly comprised of women) and the members of the IWFP in the first shots of different productions. First, it demonstrates a commitment to the strength of the collective; it emphasized that the division of roles and the fact that there was a director did not mean that one was in charge and the others obeyed. It should be noted that the director's name does not appear first in the group— and not even first in the individual credits, with the exception of *Simplemente Jenny*.

In this documentary, all of the production information is presented at the end. After one of the teenagers affirms that they wanted to be simply Jenny, a track played by an Andean flute begins and the scene portrays the faces of Bolivian girls. The image freezes on the girl with the darkest skin, who has braids, wears a hat and looks challengingly into the camera, and the text "Produced by International Women's Film Project" appears over the image. Subsequently, "Director Helena Solberg Ladd" appears on the screen; I will discuss the director's increased visibility in this production below. The following names are also highlighted in the following order: "Editor Christine Burrill," "Final Editing Grady Watts," "Assistant Editor Melanie Maholick," and "Photography Affonso Beato." The rest of roles appear together, over a red screen.

When I spoke with Helena Solberg in October 2021, the director expressed that







Frames from *The Double Day* where some of the production information is presented at the beginning of the film.

the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics of the WFP/ IWFP were different in each of the feminist trilogy films. *The Emerging Woman* was, without a doubt, the most collective of the three, according to her account. Although there were individual roles, they all read texts that were then debated in meetings, discussed the photographs that would be used, and talked about the structure of the piece, etc.

The Double Day was a project that really mobilized Solberg, the Latin American member of the group, who also had a better understanding of the subject-matter than the others. Clearly, in *The Emerging Woman* the opposite was true as Haber and Maholick were studying the history of feminism in the United States. With that said, Helena Solberg was helped by the fact that she was already living in the United States at the time and the others knew enough to teach each other.

Yet, despite being a Latin American woman, Solberg felt that she needed to formally study before the filming of *The Double Day* began. Therefore, in 1974 she decided to participate in a seminar about feminist perspectives to analyze Latin America. Held in Cuernavaca, Mexico, it featured people such as Helen Safa and June C. Nash. Safa, from the United States and Heleieth Saffioti, from Brazil are both feminist academics whom Solberg has always cited as major references for understanding the situation of women from the subcontinent, a preoccupation or an interest that she ended up bringing to the screen.

I believe there were several reasons as to why Helena Solberg reported in its first stages that *The Double Day* was not as collective as her previous film. Primarily, the rest of the team lacked training in filmmaking and had little experience with Latin America. Besides, they had to manage a huge schedule taking approximately three months in which they needed to film images and record sounds without actually being able to see the material. Nevertheless, in an interview for *Off Our Backs* with some of the members of the IWFP, Solberg described how the collective reconciled collective authorship with the division of roles in post-production:

"Editing is harder to do collectively, even if you agree in principle and try to make it possible to have 8 or 10 people sitting around the stinback [sic] making decisions. So there were three of us doing the actual editing: Christine Burrill, Suzanne Fenn, and myself. But the room was never closed to other people and I think it was pretty well understood that at any time anyone could come in to give their opinions. Also, we had talked so much before making the film and we know each other so well that there wasn't any big issue as to where the film was going. It was mainly a question of doing the best possible on something we had all agreed upon before" (17).

Simplemente Jenny, as would be expected, had different creative and collaborative processes and different dynamics. The material had already been recorded and Helena Solberg knew what she wanted to do, since she had identified the missing dimension of *The Double Day*. As I mentioned before, it was a compilation film which, according to Solberg, was produced in California by just the director, Christina Burrill and Melanie Maholick. It is possible that Grady Watts and Rose Lacreta made some contribution before or after their stay on the

east coast, considering that they appear in the credits.

It is clear that, despite the differences between the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics found in the comparison of *The Emerging Woman*, *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny*, there is an indisputable importance to producing films within a collective. This explains why in the three works analysed here, the collective's name is always featured as the first slide of credits following the title, at the start or end of the production.

I would like to briefly return to a matter that was previously alluded to here: the dimension of learning in these collective experiences. In the interview with Burton, Helena Solberg stated that the exchange of knowledge in *The Emerging Woman* was intense. She was teaching the others about film, learning about the history of feminism in the United States and, as a team, they were fostering the knowledge that each woman brought to the table.

Another example worth highlighting, is that of Lorraine Gray. A few years after starting to build the WFP/IWFP with her experience in still photography, Lorraine Gray launched *With Babies and Banners* (1978). This 45-minute production tells the story of the Women's Emergency Brigade during a strike held at General Motors Michigan between December 1937 and February 1938. The film holds a prominent role within feminist cinema of the United States. *With Babies and Banners* was produced under The Women's Labor History Film Project, and not the WFP/IWFP. But without a doubt, the experience gained in the collective was crucial both for Gray to become a director and for Melanie Maholick (assistant editor of *The Emerging Woman* and *The Double Day*, with no prior experience in film) to become one of the editors. It is also felt that all contributions were relevant, as Melanie Maholick pointed out in an interview to the magazine *Off Our Backs*, 1976:

"One way I feel we are [a collective], is that within the IWFP we all get paid the same salary for a day's work, whether it's for direction, assistant editing, or research. When we hire someone to do some typing or translation work we also pay them that same rate. We're trying to take into consideration that often different class backgrounds afford different educational opportunities for gaining certain skills. But we feel everyone's work is equally necessary to the project" (17).

In order to fully understand the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics within the collective it is important to look beyond the longest-standing members of the IWFP, and also consider the temporary partnerships. As an open



Helena Solberg and Ana Carolina filming de *The Double Day* and *Simplemente Jenny* (Helena Solberg archive).

group that was comprised of women from different countries, the IWFP had occasional contributions from those who were passing through or staying for a period in the United States. This was the case of filmmaker Tetê Moraes, a Brazilian exile living in Chile who was forced to flee in 1973 and travelled to Washington. Moraes contributed to the research for *The Double Day*.

In an interview, Helena Solberg spoke about the eclecticism of the IWFP with regard to the nationality of its members, considering both the permanent and temporary members. Her wish had been that more Brazilian women had taken part, though this was not easy, because she had already been away from her country for years. That said, as mentioned earlier, Rose Lacreta was responsible for the additional editing in *Simplemente Jenny* and collaborated with the filming in Latin America. Additionally, the director Ana Carolina, whom I briefly mentioned above, was also present on this trip at one point.

Final considerations

The WFP/IWFP was an initiative very much in tune with its historical moment and geographical space. On one hand, it aligned with the characteristics and structures of feminism in the United States. On the other hand, it also aligned with political and militant film collectives from Latin America, such as the groups Cine Liberación, Cine de la Base, Cine Urgente, Ukamau, etc. At the same time, there are important features to be highlighted. Famous New Latin American Cinema groups, such as the Grupo Cine Liberación and the Grupo Ukamau, were primarily national. This also applied to the feminist collectives of the second half of the 1970s, such as Cine Mujer in Colombia. The IWFP already had women's internationalism in its concept, in its origins, and in its very name. In addition, it brought about a major reversal in the geopolitics of audio-visual production, because there was a woman from the Third World (albeit from the higher classes of Brazil) directing in the United States.

For my analysis, I have drawn on the credits in the three selected documentaries, offered an overview of WFP/IWFP's main members (looking at their careers within the collective and beyond), and analysed the creative and collaborative processes and the dynamics within the collective. This discussion has allowed me to present an idea, albeit partial, of what the WFP/IWFP was, through the perspective of Helena Solberg. In addition, I find this is an important and singular moment in the history of women's film and cinema in the United States and Latin America. I contemplate some of the collective features, namely, how both ephemeral and enduring relationships were built within the group, the challenges of creating collectively and performing individually or in pairs/trios, as well as the translation and explanation of these rich processes onto the screen. Helena Solberg's perspective has been centred, but I also hope to add here to the research on the pioneering feminist cinemas in/from Latin American, especially in their collective forms. When the current situation changes, (which in Brazil has already claimed thousands of lives, not only in the pandemic but in the negative, genocidal ways that the governing authorities have dealt with it) I intend to continue such investigations by incorporating more points of view; surely there is still much to be written about the WFP/IWFP.

Last, I would like to close the article with an iconic image which depicts both the

collective and the endless possible answers in research. It is a photograph without a date or authorship that we could identify. A photograph that has a part compromised by a light that "leaks" at the moment of shooting, and which, in addition, bears the marks of the passage of time. Moreover, it gathers all the women behind the making of the *The Double Day*, wearing the same clothes. On a very cold night in Bolivia, the production crew got more suitable (and similar) pyjamas; but pyjamas and blankets were not enough, the warmth of the group was also necessary. As long as the struggle of women exists, the warmth of the group will always be (as it always has been) necessary.



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Notes

1. According to Tavares, the sources of funding for the feminist trilogy are: WFP (*The Emerging Woman*); Calvin Cafritz, Inter-American Foundation, Danish International Development Agency, Norwegian Agency for International Development, Swedish International Development Authority and the United Nations Development Programme (*The Double Day*); Danish International Development Agency, Inter-American Foundation, Women's Fund – Joint Foundation Support, National Endowment for the Arts, Norwegian Agency for International Development and Swedish International Development Authority (*Simplemente Jenny*). [return to page 1]

2. In all three films of the feminist trilogy, Helena Solberg was still married with her first husband, and took his surname, in accordance with the tradition in Brazil. However, sometimes she is credited as Helena Solberg-Ladd (the standard in the United States) and sometimes as Helena Solberg Ladd (the standard in Brazil). [return to page 2]

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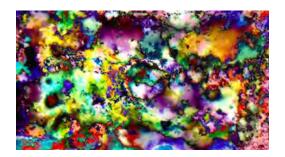
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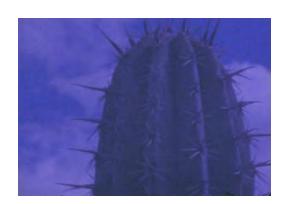
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Dresden Codex (2020), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.



Kristallnacht (2020), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.



Perspectives dialectically intersected: the Mexican audiovisual collective Los Ingrávidos and its film *Coyolxauhqui* (2017)

by Raquel Schefer

The Mexican audiovisual collective 'Los Ingrávidos' was founded at the end of 2011 between Mexico City and Tehuacán—the state of Puebla's second-largest city—in a national and international historical context of collective resistance. Even if Los Ingrávidos does not define itself as a feminist group, its modes of organization and intersectional approach, as well as the formal characteristics of its work, make it one of the most singular contemporary Latin-American film collectives.

During the Spring of 2011, protests and other types of collective action were organized in Mexico against the violence produced by the Drug War, state corruption and economic inequality. Collective resistance in Mexico echoed the forms of organization and protest of international movements in the early 2010s, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street in the United States, '15-M' in Spain, and later 'Nuit Debout' in France. From the work of the Egyptian Mosireen group to the films of Jem Cohen or Sylvain George, cinematic representations of these political movements highlight the link between economic structures and film aesthetics. They also point to a dynamic process of formal evolution of genres such as the newsreel, and put into practice a critique of sounds and images within the framework of a crisis of political representation. [1] [open endnotes in new window]

Taking its name from Valeria Luiselli's first novel, *Los Ingrávidos* (Luiselli, 2011), meaning "the weightless ones" or "those unaffected by the force of gravity",[2] during its early period the Mexican collective directly broadcast demonstrations against the government through an anonymous YouTube channel. If Los Ingrávidos' first works explored live streaming directly reporting from protests, the collective's relation to time and history is complex and multitemporal. As I will argue later, in some instances, it is cyclical.

In an interview I conducted, on November 12, 2021, Davani Varillas, collective co-founder and spokesperson, evokes "the weightlessness" [3] (Schefer c) of a country immersed in violence. Considering Los Ingrávidos' decision to operate anonymously and the lack of literature exploring its organisational and production modes, my interview with Varillas has become one of the primary sources of this examination. This approach represents a shift in my methodological procedures, which are predominantly textual and formal. I am aware that quoting this interview might entail the risk of "intentional fallacy" (Wimsatt Jr. 3-18)—in other words, the danger of assessing a work of art by assuming the purposes of its creators.



Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

Even if Varillas' perspective on Los Ingrávidos' work is an important element—particularly when the literature on the collective's modes of organizing and producing is scarce and its anonymity prevents my own fieldwork research—this article attempts to maintain critical distance regarding both an interview's value as a bibliographical reference and its speculative dimension. Ismail Xavier claims that a critical approach implies

"the fundamental gesture of pointing out the difference between project, intention and concretization, since it is the work that creates the author and not the contrary" (Xavier 12).

Concordantly, I seek to separate Varillas' assertions from the group's work's interpretational fabric and horizons, and to expose contradictions in the collective's practice—specifically in relation to distribution. However, to recall Teresa de Lauretis' approach to Chantal Akerman's comments on the poetics of her own film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), when Varillas' perspective resonates with my own critical and affective response as a scholar and viewer, "the statement cannot be dismissed with commonplaces such as authorial intention or intentional fallacy" (de Lauretis 160).

In the interview, Varillas evokes a Derridian "hauntology" (Derrida) of "dissidence and the disappeared" (Schefer c), starting with the avant-garde poet Gilberto Owen, one of the historical characters of Luiselli's novel, and progressively including "a spectral recovery of lost Latin-American voices", *i.e.*, the victims of "the dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Brazil." The collective draws from the outset a line of continuity between the forceful disappearance of thousands of political, social, trade-union and student militants and activists within the framework of Operation Condor, and contemporary forms of violence, particularly gender-based violence, rendering salient the persistence of colonial divisions, formations and hierarchies in Latin American societies.

Besides holding a dialogue with Latin America's political history, Los Ingrávidos also addresses the history of cinema. Varillas defines the "audiovisual" as a "specific visual regime in which sound takes the place of image". This occurs in the filmographies of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Marguerite Duras, Harun Farocki, and Jean-Luc Godard—mentioned in that order by the filmmaker. In line with the formal trends of the cited filmmakers, the collective aims to give an autonomy to "[lost] voices" and "sound", and "to think of sound dialectically as a visual image but also an image involving the problems afflicting us in Mexico"—a central procedure in the collective's *oeuvre*.

The group partakes of a two-fold cinematic genealogy: first, the genealogy of film collectives; second, the genealogy of political and experimental film. Los Ingrávidos' filmography—from its first works to recent films such as *Dresden Codex* (2020) and *Kristallnacht* (2020)—as well as Varillas' re ference to Godard, who formed the Dziga Vertov Group with Jean-Pierre Gorin in 1968 in opposition to the *politique des auteurs*— highlights this interlinked cinematic genealogy. At the same time, the work of Los Ingrávidos engages with other contemporary practices of experimental filmmaking in Latin America. Its *œuvre* is situated within both productivist[4] and cultural paradigms that run across the work of women filmmakers such as Alexandra Cuesta, Ana Vaz and Laura Huertas Millán; and, particularly, is found in the films of the Mexican Bruno Varela regarding the

intersection of politico-cultural and experimental elements.

Los Ingrávidos' work must be understood from the perspective of its collective and collaborative organization. They made a decision to operate anonymously, except for using the figure of Varillas, who represents the collective in film festivals and other events. As the filmmaker states, working as an anonymous collective originally derived from a violent context as they faced the persecution and killing of journalists in Mexico, but it also was a political decision. The choice of a collective mode of organising film production and distribution questions Western modernist categories such as those of "author" and "originality"—as discussed by Rosalind Krauss (Krauss)—or that of "film *oeuvre*", examined by Nicole Brenez (Brenez). Additionally, as highlighted by Varillas, this choice "rescues collectivity" in a time of "neoliberalism and the proliferation of transnational corporations" (Schefer c). Considering that "cinema is always collective," the filmmaker states that Los Ingrávidos

"wanted to emphasize collectivity against the implementation of neoliberal policies that engender individualism."

According to Almudena Escobar López, Los Ingrávidos' collective organization

"dismantles the artist-centered neo-liberal [*sic*] order where the valorization of the object and the intention of the author are at the center [*sic*] of any possible critical engagement" (Escobar López).

Additionally, Los Ingrávidos also addresses, through a non-hierarchical conception of the relation between content and form, "the propaganda of television as monopoly" (Schefer c) producing domination and the standardizing ways of perceiving and cognition.

Available on the Internet, Los Ingrávidos' Vimeo page is eloquent in terms of the aesthetic, political, ideological and epistemic positioning of the collective. In the collective's prolific and extensive filmography, the gesture of deconstructing audiovisual and cinematic grammar is inseparable from its breaking up of hegemonic scopic and representative regimes. The group's self-description on that page presents the collective's formation as arising

"from the need to dismantle the audiovisual grammar that the [sic] aesthetic-television-cinematic corporatism has used and uses to effectively guarantee the diffusion of an audiovisual ideology by means of which a continuous social and perceptual control is maintained over the majority of the population." [5]

Formed initially by "several" (Schefer c) members and later—until today—by Varillas and an anonymous man(even if collaborating, always anonymously, with different international allies), Los Ingrávidos has produced a counter-hegemonic cinema addressing the effects of narco-neoliberalism, gendered violence, and femicide. Its films also explore the possibility of creating different methods of perceiving and cognition in line with the early twentieth-century avant-garde theories. It emphasizes the capacity of cinema to restore the experience of ritual and the sacred, suppressed by modern rationality, and therefore to re-enchant the world.[6]

Los Ingrávidos' work has been consolidated mainly since 2014, following the Iguala kidnappings, i.e., the disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College in September of that year in the state of Guerrero. Since then, its films have been screened at international festivals such as the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, the Ann Arbor Film Festival and the International Film Festival Rotterdam. They are distributed internationally by

Lightcone, a Paris-based organisation responsible for the distribution, promotion and preservation of experimental cinema. Varillas states that since the beginning, the distribution of the collective's films has fundamentally relied on free-access Internet platforms such as Vimeo as a way to "politicize immediacy" (Schefer c), a reference to the livestreaming of the collective's early period. As stated by the artist, the project was conceived as a

"movement, not in the way of making a film and then circulating it through film festivals, but rather as a broader project that may be able to integrate and link different disciplines, discourses, pedagogies, movements, sensitivities, perceptions, affects." (*Ibid.*)

For Varillas, the above-mentioned kind of distribution means overcoming film festival and art institution circuits, conversely aiming for a more direct horizontal relation with the viewer. Additionally, the collective's focusing on reception would imply enlarging the category of "film work" to include dissemination practices. However, despite the desired variety it has for modes of distribution, the collective's work has had mostly elitist screenings—mainly in experimental film festivals in the Global North. This common reception of avant-garde work means there might be a contradictory approach to the communitarian dimension of its artistic *praxis*. These modes of distribution eventually reinforce categories such as the immanence and autonomy of the aesthetic sphere as they point out the ambivalence of experimental film practices in their relation to the social field.

Los Ingrávidos' work in both photochemical and digital formats scrutinizes the materiality of film, and it reuses and re-interprets audiovisual archives—namely television footage—while experimenting with sound and image. The group's filmography seems to exemplify a politically and aesthetically engaged film *praxis*. I will look more carefully at how its *praxis* partakes of the aforementioned two-folded genealogy of collective and experimental film. And second, through an analysis of *Coyolxauhqui* (2017), a film addressing femicide in Mexico, I will show how the collective expands that genealogy by dissolving conventional relations between observer and observed.

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Transmisión/Desencuadre (2014), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists





Abecedario/B (2014), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

Making political films politically

Los Ingrávidos claims to make political films politically, recalling Godard's distinction between making political films and making political films politically (MacCabe and Mulvey). Making political films politically implies going beyond the political message by also considering the political and ideological implications of different film forms and procedures, together with modes of production and distribution. Federico Windhausen discussed this regarding the use of deframing in an early film piece,[7] [open endnotes in new window] *Transmisión/Desencuadre* (2014), dealing with the Mexican army's killing of twenty adults and two minors in the municipality of Tlatlaya in 2014. According to Windhausen, through the formal use of deframing, "the broader discursive functions and effects" of the collective's work are "as important as the aesthetic experiences it offers viewers" (Windhausen 100).

As introduced earlier, the Mexican collective combine political engagement with aesthetic experimentation in its film praxis. But Los Ingrávidos also adopts specific production methods: its collective and collaborative modes of organisation, anonymity, and distribution, through free-to-access Internet platforms as a digital variation of historical political screenings in alternative film venues. Furthermore, the expression of political content through non-hegemonic film forms and the adoption of allegedly horizontal production and distribution approaches have a political and epistemic function. This function is to dismantle the dominant audiovisual and film language, struggling against the ways that hegemonic discourse standardizes our very modalities of perception and cognition. At the same time, the films offer a critical interpretation of history, as well as an analytical reading of the present. As Florencia Incarbone states regarding Abecedario/B (2014)—a work addressing violence in Mexico—through the exploration of film's materiality and perceptive processes:

"images can be used as a germ of resistance offering the possibility of seeing, feeling and thinking a different world..." (Incarbone 73).

As already stated, Los Ingrávidos' praxis is inscribed in an interlinked dual genealogy: the historical tradition of collective filmmaking and that of experimental film. However, the collective's *praxis* not only extends but also displaces this genealogy. The attention Los Ingrávidos pays to modes of production and distribution and, more specifically, to collective organization, is fundamental in ensuring the political making of political films. Collectivist cinema has long been situated within a transcontinental cartography, which has Latin America as one of its central regions (thanks to Cine Liberación and Cine de la Base, in Argentina; Grupo Ukamau in Bolivia; [8] and feminist collectives such as Cine Mujer in Mexico and Colombia, and, more recently, the Bolivian group Mujeres Creando; among others). It is straddled by a dialectics interweaving political engagement and aesthetic experimentation. Historically, collectivist cinema enabled experimentation in horizontal social relations. Yet, as recent literature has highlighted, [9] it was also traversed by the exercise and functioning of power, as it internally reproduced dominant hierarchies, particularly around gender. Varillas highlights Los Ingrávidos' collaborative and horizontal ways of organizing, its "communitarian dimension" (Schefer c) while, at the same time, recognizing the influence of Latin-American film collectives. These include Cine



2 de octubre / Lejos de Tlatelolco (2013), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

Liberación and Cine de La Base—as well as the Mexican Super Ochero Movement. Varillas does not mention any feminist film collective, but she does indicate that journalism denouncing structural gender violence in Mexico was Los Ingrávidos' most important influence.

Los Ingrávidos has theoretically overcome the Western modernist definition of the category of "*oeuvre*" as self-contained and objectual, instead affirming a relational and open conception according to which certain specificities of their work result from the reorganization of its production and distribution modes. The social function of cinema, its links to society, could be restored from this standpoint. In other words, if the historically immanent notion of 'work of art' expands, covering now the modes of production, exhibition and distribution, these modes also influence the cinematic outcomes. This perspective points to a materialist conception of cinema linked to the material modes of production and distribution.

Its film *praxis* reveals a second approach to materialist cinema as defined by Jean-Paul Fargier in "La parenthèse et le détour,"—an article published during the "Été chaud" of 1969 in Cinéthique (Fargier 15-21). Fargier, strongly influenced by Louis Althusser, specifies his understanding of non-dominant (or materialist) cinema. In his view, non-dominant (or materialist cinema) would allow the spectator to reflect upon moving images from their physical materiality and according to their function in social practice, in opposition to dominant cinema which reproduces and reflects the dominant ideologies, producing its own ideology. Briefly, if dominant cinema produces illusion and belief to convey ideology, materialist cinema would engender an active and critical spectator, aware that moving images are representations of 'reality,' and not 'reality' itself. This is what Fargier calls "the impression of reality" (Fargier 15-21), a fundamental dimension in cinema due to its indexical status, i.e., the physical causality and connection between object and image, an aspect that has deeply permeated film theory until recently. Fargier's conception presupposes a complex perspective on "reality" and its mechanisms of production, as well as on cinematic praxis itself, alongside with a reflection on the materiality of the film apparatus. These two principles traverse Los Ingrávidos' work despite temporal, spatial and ideological gaps, and the current tendency to aestheticize the political thought of the 1970s.

The gesture of examining the political and ideological implications of film forms and procedures contributes decisively to Los Ingrávidos' political making of political films. Escobar López considers the collective as "a response to the consistent use of audiovisual materials as powerful tools of domination and control for those in power" (Escobar López 73). Likewise, Varillas mentions the collective's wish to "think about its work politically" and "to operate image and sound in formal terms" (Schefer c) that go against the dominant audiovisual production. The filmmaker fundamentally places the collective's work in European and Latin-American cinematic traditions.

But Los Ingrávidos' formal procedures, when linked with the ethnographic dimension of certain films, such as *Coyolxauhqui*, are inscribed into another genealogy: that of North-American experimental cinema. In particular, the collective's work connects with a lineage of films shot in Mexico that are



Image 9: Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

impregnated by a variety of local cultural forms. In a way that suggests a kinship to experimental filmmakers work, such as Bruce Baillie's *Valentín de las Sierras* (1967) and Chick Strand's *Fake Fruit Factory* (1986), Los Ingrávidos' work brings an ethnographic gaze to experimental filmmaking (Russell. As in Los Ingrávidos' work, these two films' fragmentary and sensorial aesthetics are ways to approach the history of Mexico and the complexity of the present, as well as to review the conventional hierarchical relation between the observer and observed. At the same time, the collective's filmography relates to the history of collective film in Mexico, specifically the *Superochero* movement (Vázquez Mantecón). But it also has a relation with contemporary communitarian film, such as ProMedios de Comunicación Comunitaria/Chiapas Media Project, and Mexican found-footage experimental film (Valdez Puertos)—in particular the works of Ximena Cuevas and Naomi Uman that involve the experimental appropriation of archival footage. The absence of these references in Varillas' discourse as she spoke to me might point to the risk I mentioned of "intentional fallacy" (Wimsatt Jr. 3-18).

The aesthetic and political dimension of Los Ingrávido's work reinforces the possibility of rethinking the ideological determinants of the separation of avant-garde/experimental and political film as non-hegemonic cinematic *praxis*. At the same time, it affirms the indissoluble link between aesthetics and politics, *i.e.*, the intrinsic political dimension of non-dominant film forms in their opposition to hegemonic cinema as a mechanism of production of regulation and domination. In this sense, cinema's social function (and that of art in general) would coexist with the premise that a film is only political subject to the condition that it critiques the dominant forms of representation (and the hegemonic modes of production).

The two avant-gardes and a productivist and cultural approach

Following Peter Wollen's perspective (Wollen 127-137), Los Ingrávidos' films may be situated at the intersection between two avant-gardes. First, an "aesthetic" avant-garde, taking into consideration the way the collective uses the film material, the materiality of film, and the cinematic apparatus. Secondly, a "political" avant-garde (according to Wollen, fundamentally European, represented by Godard, and Straub and Huillet, mentioned by Varillas) since it mobilizes, at the narrative and aesthetic levels, diegetic experimental forms and hybrid strategies to critically examine the ideological implications of audiovisual production, particularly regarding the dominant culture's exercise of social and perceptual control over the population.

As it combines political engagement with aesthetic experimentation, Los Ingrávidos' work exemplifies—but also exceeds—the intersections between the two avant-gardes. Los Ingrávidos' *praxis* inherits the contradictions and ambivalences of the historical avant-gardes (Bürger)—contradictions and ambivalences that also traverse the post-war avant-garde movements, such as the Léttristes and Situationists. As Peter Bürger argues, the historical avant-garde negated the disjunction of art and the *praxis* of life that is the fundament of bourgeois autonomous art. In his words,

"the avant-garde intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life (Bürger 54)."

Or, according to Bürger, this has not occurred and may not occur in bourgeois society "unless it be as a false sublation of autonomous art" (Bürger 54)."

Analysing the historical avant-garde movement's attempts to abolish autonomous art, Guy Debord interprets the failure of Dadaism and Surrealism in terms of the

failure of the proletarian movement in the 1930s. For Debord, the failure of the proletarian movement contains the two avant-garde movements in the aesthetic sphere that they had proclaimed as abolished. According to the thinker, the Situationists would have elaborated, in turn, a critical position that would demonstrate that "the suppression and the realisation of art are inseparable aspects of the same *overcoming* [*sic*] of art" (Debord 185-186). Nevertheless, the Situationist movement also failed to integrate art into the praxis of life.

Despite this genealogy, Los Ingrávidos makes a fundamental shift in terms of themes dealt with and fields of action. In line with the historical and post-war avant-garde formal practices, the collective's work aims to dissolve any impression of reality. At the operational level, it attempts to overcome the dialectic that historically has traversed militant and engaged filmmaking. That is, the collective's work reviews the relations between film as a reflection of "reality" (even if it problematizes that and results, to a degree, from Mexico's specific contemporary socio-political conditions) and its function in transforming the social field. But Los Ingrávidos' work expands this framework as its work shifts to a theoretical reflection, formalized in a correlative film *praxis*, focusing on how the dominant perceptual, cognitive, representational and scopic systems are crossed and determined by the intersection between different categories of domination related to the capitalist-colonial-patriarchal system, an aspect that I am going to develop later.

Los Ingrávidos' film work taken as a collection recomposes a politico-cultural, perceptual, cognitive, formal and epistemic counter-hegemonic fabric from this process of disarticulation. From a material and narrative point of view, it weaves a fabric as each piece by the collective intra-textually relates to previous or future work, as in the *Alphabet series* initiated in 2014. More broadly, its work also interweaves a productivist and cultural approach. In 1995, Hal Foster published a landmark article, "The Artist as Ethnographer" (Foster 302-309; the title evoked Walter Benjamin's notion of "the author as a producer" (Benjamin 85-103),[10] identifying a new paradigm in "advanced" art (Foster 302-309).[11] For Foster, anthropology had become a disciplinary reference point for artistic practice and critical discourse. With the transition from the productivist paradigm to the "quasi-ethnographic" paradigm, autonomous art has remained an object of contestation.

However, the ethnographic artist now focuses on the "cultural other" rather than on the proletariat as "social other." According to Foster, certain fundamental assumptions in the old productivist paradigm are still present in the new one. These include the claim that the site of artistic—and political—transformation is located elsewhere, together with the perception that the point of subversion of dominant culture always comes from the outside and as a cultural or social alterity. In this context, the artist is perceived as "a cultural or social other." Besides the risk of "ideological patronage" to which Foster, following Benjamin, draws attention, the risk of reproducing the system of binary oppositions—between self and other, identity and alterity—that anthropology (and colonialism) historically promoted is still present in this paradigm.

As stated previously, Los Ingrávidos' work brings an ethnographic eye to experimental filmmaking. But, as its filmography rethinks the aesthetic, political, epistemic and ethical conditions of cinema, attempting to dismantle interlocked categories of domination, it redefines the "quasi-ethnographic" paradigm developed by Foster combining a productivist and cultural approach. In their work, Los Ingrávidos addresses communities historically pushed to the margins of Mexican society—both a cultural and social alterity, such as the women who lost their lives to femicide in *Coyolxauhqui*—through an intersectional perspective attempting to interlock different dominant categories. Additionally, *Coyolxauhqui*





Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

addresses this topic through a redefinition of the perceptive and cognitive positions associated with the conventional hierarchies between the observer and the observed, *i.e.*, dialectically intersected perspectives, an aspect that I will develop later. Los Ingrávidos' work attempts to overcome the binary between the self and the other that traverses the histories of ethnography and documentary.

The collective weaves the lines of counter-dominant perspectives over what Varillas terms the "classism and racism" and "the aesthetics of whiteness" of Mexican television. These categories, which result from neoliberalism, a perspective that reveals the collective's classical Marxist conception of the relation between infrastructure and superstructure, have produced "a cognitive and perceptual catastrophe" in Mexico and "Hollywood's perceptual hegemony." (Schefer c). Although Los Ingrávidos does not define itself as a feminist collective but, more precisely, as a poetic-political front addressing intersected domination structures, male dominance is one of the categories its work attempts to pull apart.

As demonstrated by film theory and critique in the 1970s—notably by Laura Mulvey—and subsequent developments in this field, gender domination is conveyed and reproduced in cinema by the "male gaze." In the words of Mulvey, who uses psychoanalytic theory to deconstruct the phallocentrism of cinematic representations,

"psychoanalytic theory is... appropriated... as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (Mulvey 6).

As examined by de Lauretis, the feminist film culture of the mid-to-late seventies tended to highlight two different types of film pieces: one called for "immediate documentation for purposes of political activism"; the other insisted on "rigorous, formal work of the medium" (de Lauretis 155). Los Ingrávidos' work seems to connect these two tendencies to disengage the ideological codes and the ideology of domination embedded in cinematic representation. In the collective's work, there is neither the "female" nor "feminist" gaze in opposition to the "male gaze," but an attempt to draw attention to how different dominant categories (including male dominance) related to the capitalist-colonial-patriarchal system structure film forms and ideology.

Los Ingrávidos' work—particularly *Coyolxauhqui* (2017, a film analyzed in the next section of this article)—indeed addresses intertwined categories of domination; notably what Joaquín Barriendos defines as the "coloniality of the gaze,"

"the coloniality that underlies every visual regime based on the polarization and inferiorization between the subject that observes and its object (or the subject) observed" (Barriendos 15).

For Barriendos.

"the coloniality of the gaze is constitutive of modernity, acting consequently as a model... of domination, which is fundamental to all instances of contemporary life" (Barriendos 16).

The notion of "coloniality of the gaze" may be transposed to the territory of cinema. This transposition would imply determining how the ideology of the film apparatus—in particular, the production of an impression of reality examined by Fargier (15-21)—in its inextricable connection to other ideological values, such as automatism (supposedly automatic functioning), and objectivity—has historically conveyed and prolonged the modern-colonial paradigm of seeing/knowing.

In its work, Los Ingrávidos perceives the categories of domination in conjunction with each other, suggesting that the dominant film discourse and the hegemonic cinematic gaze result from—and convey—class, race and gender divisions that structure and underpin the capitalist-colonial-patriarchal system. To take apart the dominant perceptual and cognitive forms, to "dismantle the audiovisual grammar,"[12] would therefore contribute to desegregating dominant categories. Los Ingrávidos' *démarche* is located both in productivist and cultural paradigms, as previously mentioned. Its work constitutes an inter-epistemic and inter-visual dialogue[13] between, first, political and experimental filmmaking—making political films politically—and, second, pre-Hispanic culture, made invisible by the historical development of modernity/colonialism.

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Coyolxauhqui (2017)





Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

Coyolxauhqui addresses gender violence and femicide in Mexico. It is available for view on Vimeo (https://vimeo.com/173879106). The film has been screened in international festivals, such as the Media City Festival and the London Short Film Festival. Its title refers to Aztec cosmology, concretely the assassination of the moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui, by her brother, Huitzilopochtli, the sun and war god. This is evoked by the shots of the moon rising in the second part of the film.







Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists

The piece connects an extra-European and pre-Hispanic cosmology to the current sociopolitical situation of Mexico, pointing to gender violence as a cyclical *continuum*—a timeless and transcultural phenomenon. As Escobar López argues, *Coyolxauhqui* explores "the connection between current Mexican femicides to larger cultural formations" (Escobar López). The film addresses the (im)possibility of representing the unfigurable, and "unwatchable'—in Windhausen's words (Windhausen 97). Writing about another Los Ingrávidos' short, *Sonderkommando* (2014), which tackles the Iguala events, Adrián Cangi states that the collective examines violence by "delving into the excess of the impossible" (Cangi 90). A similar *démarche* runs through *Coyolxauhqui*: how to give audiovisual expression to the unfigurable violence of femicide?



Coyolxauhqui was shot in the region of La Mixteca, in western Oaxaca, site of several textile *maquilas*; *i.e.*, transnational manufacturing plants that import duty-free components for assembly and export taking advantage of low-cost

Sonderkommando (2014), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.



Danzas Lunares (2020), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

labour mainly made up of women. The film ties in the myth of Coyolxauhqui—the subject of other films such as *Danzas Lunares* (2020)—with the wave of murders of young women who worked in the *maquilas*. If the most well-known murders happened in Ciudad Juárez, a context entered into by Roberto Bolaño in his novel *2666* (Bolaño), and Lourdes Portillo in her documentary film *Señorita Extraviada* (2002), the wave of femicides affects many other areas, including rural Mexico.

Coyolxauhqui's opening sequence is a series of self-reflexive blurred snapshots of cactuses, soil, leaves, fruit and other natural elements with improvised percussion in its soundscape. The prologue formalizes the process of construction and organization of the gaze that structures the film and defines its enunciative position—in other words, its "place of speech" (Ribeiro)— contributing, therefore, to dissolve the binary between the self and other. When the shots finally widen (to then close again), the perspective remains mobile and fugitive since the camera floats incessantly through bidirectional lateral movement as if incapable of stopping at any visual element.





Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

The figuration of the Mixteca Region with its mobility of the camera and extreme close-ups opposes—and profanes (Agamben)—the hegemonic and imperial representations of landscape. W. J. T. Mitchell deems that the landscape genre is a cultural and political practice—"not a genre of art but a medium" (Mitchell 5). For him, it is a historical formation associated with imperial regimes, from Chinese imperial landscape views to the representations of the "Holy Land," the contested territory of Israel and Palestine. According to Mitchell, within imperial regimes, the totalizing images characterizing the idea of landscape (in film, wide shots) engenders a politics of identity, defining the relation between the self and the other in spatial and temporal terms. Landscape is thus "a process by which social and subjective identities are formed" (Mitchell 1).







: Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

In *Coyolxauhqui*, the counter-hegemonic forms of landscape figuration foster a place of dispute for any fixed dualist self-other identity. Landscape figuration

overcomes pure visuality to formalize the coming together of dialectical perspectives. In the second part, when, after the rising moon shots, the camera goes back to the soil capturing the women's shoes, and clothes—traces of the femicides—the film apprehends the cultural, political and ideological significance of landscape. This is done through the integrated transition from natural to cultural elements and bringing of attention to the historical—and violent, unrepresentable—*hors champ* of the murders enacted by the feminine musical lamentation accompanying the sequence, the sound taking the place of and rendering significant the absent images.[14] [open endnotes in new window]





The reading of the Coyolxauhqui myth relies on the entwining of mythical and historical times. This weaving together opposes the causal and teleological linearity of the Western conception of time. Cyclical temporality, evoking the transhistorical and transcultural nature of gender violence, determines the film's fragmentary narrative structure. The dialogical interweaving of visual cultures not only structures *Coyolxauhqui* thematically but also shapes its film form. In Los Ingrávidos' work, there is no hierarchy between the content and the form, as mentioned previously. The content reflects form in the same way as the form mirrors content. The tension between the forms of the political and the politics of forms opens the way to a reflection on the formation processes for non-dominant perceptive, cognitive, and representative systems.







Coyolxauhqui (2017), Los Ingrávidos, courtesy of the artists.

Coyolxauhqui was filmed with expired 16 mm film, a procedure that gives a singular tone to its images and refers to the medium's materiality against any production of an impression of reality (Fargier 15-21). The film equipment and the eruption of its materiality are fundamental elements in Coyolxauhqui beyond the discursive organization of disarticulated sounds and images. Los Ingrávidos aimed to make the spectator sensitive to the medium, thus having the film operate in the spheres of perception and cognition. The film works on perception and cognition also through its fragmentary and sensorial aesthetics, inter-connections between horizontal and vertical forms of editing, juxtapositions, and inner and outer frame movements. In this way, the film proposes a cinematic countergrammar which, being inscribed in different cinematic genealogies, suggests the intersection between categories of domination and how film might operate to dismantle this.

Los Ingrávidos conceived Coyolxauhqui as "an animistic and animalistic immersion in space," as stated by Varillas (Schefer c). Its narrative and aesthetic procedures formalize a non-human gaze, "an animal gaze," in the words of the filmmaker (Schefer c), within an ecology of signs and perspectives aiming to reconstitute the invisible community disintegrated by the maquilas nonfiguratively and elliptically, in order to make an absence present. This ecology induces a non-hierarchical circulation and reciprocity of perspectives between the human and non-human elements (vegetable, mineral, and mechanical elements) and in this way theoretically expresses a non-anthropocentric gaze. It indeed produces a dialectical intersection of gazes—eventually externalizing an intersectional one. The camera movements' choreography, as well as the repetition of motifs creating the ideas of persecution and encirclement, attempt to reproduce both the perspective of the "hunter"—transnational corporations according to Varillas— and the "hunted" (Schefer c)—the victims of the capitalistcolonial-patriarchal system, in particular non-white working-class women who are both a social and cultural other. The film's political, aesthetic and epistemic potentialemerges precisely from the gesture of overcoming the perceptive and cognitive positions associated with the conventional hierarchies between the observer and observed, as these are now presented through dialectically intersected perspectives. Besides the non-hegemonic figuration of landscape, the disarticulation of the conventional hierarchies between the observer and observed is a poetic-political gesture dissolving any fixed dual identity—the binary between self and other-and points to our collective responsibility as citizens and spectators.

The hierarchies between observer and observed have historically structured the epistemic and representative Western systems, including ethnography and cinema—particularly, documentary film. Los Ingrávidos' gesture suggests not only the possibility of putting into place a divergent scopic system, one not determined by the aforementioned types of domination. It also infers engendering different perceptual and cognitive modalities that point to cinema's capacity to reinstate the experience of the ritual and the sacred that has long been suppressed by modern rationality, thereby re-enchanting the world.

In conclusion

Since 2011, Los Ingrávidos has addressed how the hegemonic ways of perception, cognition, and the cinematic gaze convey categories of domination. The group dismantles dominant audiovisual and cinematic language through collective

production modes and through challenging hierarchies and separation between the observed and the observed. It works towards a divergent scopic paradigm incorporating poetic-political gestures and strategies of de-alienation and emancipation. Situated at the crossroads between two intertwined cinematic traditions—collective filmmaking and political and avant-garde/experimental film—Los Ingrávidos attempts, through the subjects it approaches, its political engagement and its modes of organisation, production and distribution, to reconnect the aesthetic sphere to the social field, inheriting the ambivalences of the historical and post-war avant-garde movements.[15]

If, as stated previously, the distribution of Los Ingrávidos' films mainly in experimental festivals in the Global North implies an ambivalent approach to the communitarian dimension of its artistic *praxis* and the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, this article also presents their limitations. These are in relation to the collective's internal functioning (operating anonymously, as mentioned), regarding which it would be important to have further information. Performing fieldwork—observation of Los Ingrávidos' working processes—could contribute to overcoming its limitations to a certain extent, particularly regarding the collective's communitarian involvement. This would allow full appreciation of the structures defining its praxis. However, carrying out fieldwork would necessarily entail disrespecting the wish of the collective to remain wrapped in protective anonymity. For me it means I face a paradox in writing about Los Ingrávidos and makes some of the arguments in this article no more than speculative.

Regardless of the difficulties, Los Ingrávidos' work questions both the hegemonic modes of filmmaking and the regimes of representation marked by patriarchy. Its work exemplifies a combination of political engagement and aesthetic inventiveness in contemporary artistic practice. It also attempts to dismantle hegemonic audiovisual language as a form of expression and vehicle for the dominant perceptual, cognitive, representational and scopic regimes determined by the intersection between different categories of domination related to the capitalist-colonial-patriarchal system.

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Notes

- 1. On this topic, see Schefer a and b. [return to page 1]
- 2. Erika Balsom proposes the latter translation in her note on Los Ingrávidos published in the catalogue for the 2019 Whitney Biennial (Balsom 271).
- 3. All translations are my own.
- 4. In "The Artist as Ethnographer" (Foster 302-309), an article that I will examine later, Hal Foster identifies a new paradigm in "advanced" art: "the artist as ethnographer." The expression evokes Walter Benjamin's notion of "the author as a producer" (Benjamin 85-103). To define the "cultural paradigm" of the "artist as ethnographer," Foster holds a dialogue with Benjamin. In 1934, at the Institut for the Study of Fascism in Paris, the German philosopher called on the artist to intervene, as an art revolutionary worker, to transform the "techniques" of traditional media and, therefore, the "apparatus" of bourgeois culture. This text argues, as I will develop later, that Los Ingrávidos' work situates both in this productivist paradigm and in the cultural one.
- 5. Los Ingrávidos. Vimeo page, https://vimeo.com/user15819885.
- 6. Among other possible examples, see Delluc pp. 49-51; Eisenstein; and Epstein.
- 7. Deframing is a (de)compositional strategy through which a figure or object—in the case of *Transmisión/Desencuadre*, a photography of a military spectacle—is expelled beyond (or outside) the frame. This strategy may be seen as a gesture of deconstruction of the space of representation. In Los Ingrávidos' work, this strategy aligns with the wish to break up the dominant perceptual, cognitive, representational and scopic systems. [return to page 2]
- 8. Windhausen and Miguel Errazu have approached the relation between Los Ingrávidos' early works and both modern cinema and modernism. Windhausen considers that *Transmisión/Desencuadre*) can be seen as "extending and renewing—particularly through its audio—the prominent tradition of ideological dissent and political protest associated with the New Latin American Cinema." However, the theoretician highlights that, in contrast to a film such as Cine Liberación's *La Hora de los Hornos* (1966/1968), it "brackets out the image of violence, electing [sic]instead to mediate it through language" (Windhausen 99). Errazu, analyzing the functions of the slash sign in Los Ingrávidos' *2 de octubre / Lejos de Tlatelolco* (2013), affirms that it is "a way to overcome the aporias set by the poetics of disjunction and binary oppositions that structured countercinematic *rhetorics of break* [sic] during the 60s and 70s..." (Errazu 119).
- 9. For instance, regarding the role of women in Ogawa Pro Collective, Iskra Collective, and Grupo Ukamau (Nornes; Roudé, 2017; Seguí 2018).
- 10. See footnote no. 4 regarding Benjamin's notion of "the author as a producer."

- 11. The following quotations are from Foster's essay.
- 12. Los Ingrávidos. Vimeo page, op. cit..
- 13. Jesse Lerner deems that pre-Hispanic Mexican culture has been a source of inspiration and iconography for modernism. The dialectics between modernism and primitivism also was a fundamental aspect of the construction of the Mexican post-revolutionary state (Lerner).

Likewise, Deborah Dorotinsky Alperstein reflects upon the role of the symbolic photographic construction of the Lacandon Rain-Forest and the Lacandon Indians—excluding other Amerindian groups—as one of its elements fostering the formation of Mexican national identity (Dorotinsky Alperstein).

- 14. See page 2 for further development of the relation between sound and image in Los Ingrávidos' work. [return to page 3]
- 15. Bürger, Peter., op. cit..

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Ka+ Jana Uai. Shooting of *El buen vivir*, a TV series that ran for three years and was the first to present national indigenous cinema, with over thirty episodes from as many villages.





Buen Vivir crews. In the center of the top image is foundational force, Nelly Kuiru.

Nosotras, las otras: We, the other women

by Lita Rubiano Tamayo

translated by Luke Stobart

In looking at Afro and indigenous cinema in Colombia it is important to consider feminist and community initiatives in Abya Yala where two women's audio-visual collectives, Ka + Jana Uai (The Voice of Our Image) and Renacer y Memoria (Rebirth and Memory), aim to film their territory and continent from the point of view of women in the periphery. To do this, they have created audio-visual schools with collective filmmaking and distribution and innovative pegagogical practice. The groups have their audiences in mind as their priority. They seek to raise awareness that reality does not change by itself, and that they are approriating media production tools in order to create stories that establish emancipatory paradigms. They want their audio-visual works to promote hope and liberation, to strengthen their identities and to bear profound meaning: that is, women's iron will to defend their right to communication in a country that frequently neglects them and makes them invisible.

Published in 2017, an official document summarizing Public Policy for Colombian Indigenous Peoples' Own Communication (PPCPI) responds to a need that had been expressed by indigenous peoples since 2010.[1] [open endnotes in new window] This need is to exercise their fundamental right to have their own communication tools in order to educate, inform, and make their struggles visible. Moreover, the same initiative has opened the way for other rural communities—people of African descent and peasant farmers—and working-class urban groups to access public funding. It also has led to the setting up of dozens of small groups that make media and organize screenings and discussions.[2] Such groups initiate processes of audio-visual training, filmmaking and screening in what are known as the "red zones," particularly in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Caribbean region), the Amazon region, and the Colombian Andes.[3]

Here I am foucusing on the work of two community groups: the School of Indigenous Communication Ka + Jana Uai, led by Amazon women of the Murui-Muinane people and founded in 2015; and the Escuela Renacer y Memoria (Rebirth and Memory School), a project led by Black women from south-western Colombia, and founded in 2016. Through analysing issues related to their production processes, representation of women, and handling of violence, I want to reflect on the following larger questions:

- How can community groups explore and affirm their identity by means of their own processes of audio-visual creation?
- In which ways can they use audio-visual language a mechanism of denunciation and resistance against armed pressures to leave their



In keeping with their commitment to their communities, *Buen Vivir* films were shown in local screenings. This announces a projection on Wednesday, Oct. 20, "the night of the full moon."



Title card for Raa: Plants of Wisdom to Harmonize the World.





Scenes from Raa.

territory?

- What ways of representing women does their work suggest?
- What narrative forms adapted to their technological capacities and societies have they developed?

On the one hand, I want to emphasize how these practices, representations, and distribution and screening processes differ from those of commercial television and movie-making. On the other, I locate the cinema made by these groups as socially creating spaces in which the community is permanently listened to.[4]

My observations spring from my experience in these geographical areas, where I work professionally. Specifically, from 2008 to 2018, I carried out training workshops in audio-visual production in communities in the Cauca, Sierra Nevada de Santa María, Nariño and Putumayo provinces. During those years, using a community-based, people's education methodology, I promoted setting up film clubs and creating or encouraging local screening circuits. As these experiences allowed me to participate in such community initiatives, I also became acquainted with other groups' audio-visual productions and inquired into their creative film-making processes. During this endeavour, I started asking myself specifically about the role of women in the creation of community film schools. This article has arisen from that exploration and a series of interviews I recorded in 2019 and 2020 with the women founders of these schools, members of these communities, and the audiences for such films. I should clarify that with the groups I discuss in this article, I only have a relationship of exchanging experiences and research and not of teaching in their communities.

All of the women that participated in these recordings are active members or founders of the mentioned schools. However, for the purposes of analysis I will focus on the accounts of two women—Nelly Kuiru and Laura Valencia / "Nuwanda." Kuiru is the creator and founder of Ka + Jana Uai. For the last two decades, she has been a driving force behind the PPCPI. Nationally, she was the first woman to hold political office in the Organisation for Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), which is part of the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC). Nuwanda grew up in Buenos Aires and lives in Cauca (Colombia), a territory characterised as being a point of transit for legal armed groups—the army and police—and illegal ones. She is part of the team that founded Renacer y Memoria—a collective she joined after training as a sociologist at the Universidad del Valle.

Ka + Jana Unai—decolonising the gaze

For almost 15 years, Ka+ Jana Uai (The Voice of Our Image) insisted that the indigenous authorities of Colombia's Amazonia should have their own communication tools. Finally, in 2015, the first Ka+ Jana Uai travelling school was formed, founded by Nelly Kuiru. Its creation inaugurated the activation of an indigenous public policy of communication, mainly because it put pressure on cultural and audio-visual funds and the public media system to give specific slots, grants and opportunities to indigenous peoples. Significantly, it is not a school recognised within the commercial sphere, despite some of its productions having won awards or shortlisted in film festivals or having achieved visibility by earning a slot on national television or within the Public Media System.[5] At first, the school's curriculum centred on teaching the technical aspects of radio and audiovisual creation. Yet quickly Ka+ Jana Uai threw itself into discourse analysis and from there made a link to political communication and appropriated a philosopy of self-communication and learning in action. Ka+ Jana Uai is not just a technical school for audio-visual training but a political wager that uses audio-visual



One of the goals of the various groups is to film elders so as to preserve language, history, ecological knowledge, wisdom, and survival skills.







Renacer y Memoría

communication as the main form of action.

A principal objective of this school is to question the representation of women in national film productions and talk about feminisms within Amazonian women's circumstances. The school has two lines of work: gender violence and sexual violence. These topics recur in the commercial films, TV series and soap operas to which people in the region have permanent access. The first project on gender violence focuses on a mixed-gender meeting which, three times a year, brings together young people from the ages of seven to 23 from the whole of "macro-Amazonia"[6] and from the Murui-Muinane, Huitoto, Ticuna and Bora peoples. The second kind of community education was created in conjunction with the Fundación Numaira (Numaira Foundation) in 2016 and involves women of all ages. The two axes use the same methodology: show concrete examples of sexual violence from commercial series, films and soap operas, and then de-naturalise (de-construct) scenes of sexual violence. As an example, these groups use scenes from the most commercially successful film at the Colombian box office, El paseo (Trompetero 2010), and all of its sequels to discuss different kinds of sexual harassment and abuse. Attendees learn to see how both kinds of violence have become naturalised by having been introduced into the comedy genre.

Reborn: sung reality

In 2016, the Escuela Renacer y Memoria (Rebirth and Memory School) was created. This group uses an audio-visual process set up by the Asociación de Mujeres Afrodescendientes del Norte del Cauca (Association of Women of African Descent from the Northern Cauca, ASOM).[7] The association, after the conference 'Women: Peace Builders,' highlights the importance of community communication for defending human rights. It centres on audio-visual production with the aim of drawing attention to the community's women leaders, their organisational processes, and group's project of recognising and rebuilding shared memory. The school was created by eight Black women around the municipality of Buenos Aires—to the north of the Cauca province in southern Colombia. They have taken responsibility for looking for specific resources for productions, promoting and organising training spaces, and seeking distribution and screenings in both community and commercial festivals. Furthermore, they have encouraged creating meeting places for the land's Afro community and for remembering the victims of Colombian domestic political and social conflict. With the school, they have sought to develop their own communication resources, to which they apply ethnic, community and gender perspectives. Some of the organisation's members have been trained in audio-visual techniques, thanks to tutoring by Mujeres al Borde (Women on the Edge), [8] but most have gained their practical knowledg from making short films.

In this group's self-development process, other knowledge is acquired that is not directly related to audio-visual technique but which is relevant for preserving historical memory. Standing out in this regard are investigations into womenfocused ancestral knowledge and introducing spaces for the spoken word, as well as setting up weaving circles, singing, dancing, music groups, and education in midwifery. This mixture of learning other cultural knowledge, alongside learning audio-visual, radio and publishing techniques, seeks to have an impact on the distribution of members' communicational pieces in festival and community-event networks nationally and internationally. The effect on the community itself is notable and members have been able to participate in well-established and recognised national festivals (Cartagena de Indias International Film Festival, Bogotá International Documentary Film Festival, Santa Fé de Antioquia Film Festival, and others). This is despite the group's operating in the margins and without active participation in film funds. Nor do they get to be included in the filmmaking-team directories officially promoted by the Ministry of Culture



Collective planning is central to the filmmaking process.





Screenwriting.

through its page that maps out the audio-visual ecosystem in Colombia.[9]

Community feminisms

These schools were created and are led by women who, following a principle of learning by doing, inquire into the identity forged by the founding myth of the three rural cultural groups in Colombia: those of African descent, indigenous people, and peasant farmers. Political education is fundamental to the schools and performed through film analysis, which consists of discussing opinions on camera shots, use of music and dialogue, and other elements making up audiovisual language. There is also discussion about the role of women in film—in front of and behind the camera. The women participating tend towards orality (using the spoken rather than written word to communicate) and listening in order to question the naturalisation of gender violence; and they then use on a daily basis what they learn about film language to understand how the media have promoted a stereotype of rural women in Colombia.

In short, these collectives promote being aware of the repercussion images have in social construction. The technical and the political intertwine as they analyze issues such as the porn industry, misogyny, racism, whitewashing, and the stylisation of bodies and faces. Thanks to such discussions in their communities, doors have been opened to allow cis, transgender, lesbian and gay women and men to have a safe space to talk and learn about the colonial legacy and its link with race, class and sexuality. All of the participants also take on multiple roles: they sing, direct or write, and they rotate logistic responsibilities in the filmmaking (producing, directing, camerawork, art design, costume, acting, etc.).

The two schools assert that acquiring knowledge carries with it a historical responsibility. Consequently, they advance *performing* alternative processes to modify the audio-visual language developed in the Global North. In the words of Nuwanda,

"we communities in the Global South learned it as if it were the only option ... we want the power to turn it upside down, appropriate it and use it among ourselves [in the community]."

Thus, they empahsize the importance of people from the territory themselves telling or doing stories from their personal experience and perspective. The two groups also link other arts to the audio-visual, such as the spoken word, the *copla* and other music, because, as Nuwanda suggests,

"you grow up thinking that we are a diverse people but ... there is a very big difference between an outsider doing a film here than when people who live in the territory do so." [10]

These schools' technical-political training stage also is diverse as it responds to the actual needs of production. Ka+ Jana Uai devotes nearly a month for such training, alternating places of learning in order to expand the possibility of leaders accessing media making, so that the leaders then afterwards film in their communities. In order to avoid culturally-learned exoticisation, self-indigenisation and folklorisation of their ways of life in their stories, various situations are analysed during the learning phase such as:

- Not doing the ritual without being in the right time of the year;
- Not choosing issues for the market and not exploring local knowledge;
- Not being at the mercy of the timescales imposed by the film industry;
- Avoid falling into the racist and sexist vortex of the industry when it distorts the self-recognition carried out by indigenous women; and



Learning all the roles.

 Avoid wearing attire such as necklaces and tiger fangs, feather crowns, and other ornaments which only the elderly use at the end of their training process and after a long and gruelling spiritual career (meaning aged 70 or 80 years).

In terms of this last point, as Nelly Kuiru suggests,

"now anyone uses [spiritual clothing, rituals...] and talks [about their meaning...] without having lived it. If they are dressed with feathers or naked, they are interviewed or photographed. We have a duty to end that." [11]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA





Las Renacientes somos un grupo de mujeres jóvenes que desde la comunicación propia y comunitaria, trabajamos por mantener la memoría de nuestras comunidades ancestrales.

Title sequence for *Polifonía. Renaciente* means reborn and also resurgent. "We are a group of young women who work together from a perspective of appropriate and communitarian communication in order to keep alive our ancestral communities' memory."



Scenes of the crew's collective planning recur throughout the film.

The technical training stage of Renacer y Memoria lasts two weeks, in which time participants explore the areas of directing, photography, sound and production. The educational phase ends with the writing of a short-film script made collectively with and for the community. Using exercises focused on making one-minute or "nanofilms," they investigate the following issues in the word circles:

- Linking ancestrality to other territories outside Colombia stemming from the history of slavery;
- Learning plants of power and the knowledge that derives from them;
- De-constructing sexualisation, exoticization, and the degrading of women who are black or of African descent on the screen in Colombian cinema.[12]

Renacer y Memoria does political education continually in the territory through reading texts, discussing the national situation, and analysing Colombian films that get close to their own realities (although the conclusion reached by both schools is that many of these films do not reflect their lives, dreams or needs). By combining the search for stories that expose the flaws found in national cinema with performing their own audio-visual pieces, the process helps the community to recognise itself and to be familiar with its women elders[13][open endnotes in new window]—who give guidance as to the issues that should be in the audio-visual productions and link these with pedagogical healing processes. Their tales seek to talk about that which has been undervalued: care, the home, cleaning, food, farm work—in short, what women do in the countryside. The school's audio-visual production processes have become discussion spaces in which, as well as sharing ideas on the mentioned issues, women participants state that they do not feel represented in national mainstream cinema, especially those films included in press movie listings and reviews. Nuwanda explains:

"When we were making *Polifonía* [Polyphony; a short by Gaitán and Laura Valencia that won the production grant Ethnic Communication 2018], the grant tutor told us that the women looked very neatly dressed. So, we asked him, what is the documentary cinema that you do? How should a Black woman be seen? With her bra showing? How should we be seen? What do they want us to be like? With the chance of telling our own story, we have the power to see ourselves as we want later. [In Colombia] we have got used to poverty porn. The camera is shoved in your face disrespectfully."[14]

When Nuwanda says "the camara is shoved your face disrespectfully," she is referring to the fact that people with academic audio-visual training, who are linked to universities or governmental organisations that occasionally fund these initiatives, normally accompany these processes without paying any respect to traditions or the women's desire for autonomy, and they intervene in the shot, even in the case of documentary filmmaking. This includes deciding the way women dress, their daily conversations, and even who should appear on the screen, according to the outsiders' formal and aesthetic criteria. Accordingly, Renacer y Memoria feels that access to filmmaking equipment and knowledge is intended mostly for the white and mixed-race elites who have usurped representation of communities of African descent. As Nelly Kuiru notes:

"The message from cinema that reaches us in the jungle does not bring anything positive for women or the country. Irresponsibly, they abuse





Scenes with a midwife. She listens to the fetus in the womb with a handcarved wooden ear trumpet.





Memories of violence and forced relocation and dispossession of their land.

all Colombian women. It's how they see us from the outside. It's nobody's secret that in Colombia there is sex and drugs tourism. Our girls are exposed to it all of the time. When you don't know what is behind the screen, you tend to imitate what is shown there." [15]

In many parts of the Amazonia, people still find the experience of seeing a screen completely new. When the paraphernalia arrives to do a projection, the attraction is immense. Whole communities (of around seven families with 20 or 30 members in each) gather, without being aware that the scenes of sexual violence shown in the films are aimed at adults and not children.

According to Kelly Kuiru, the first action carried out by the school was a joint diagnosis with the communities that had suffered the bonanza from both rubber and the paste used for cocaine. Asked "what do you want to do when you grow up?" many girls answered that they wanted to be prostitutes, police officers or guerrilla fighters. The boys said that it was normal to rape or be raped, referring to scenes that they had seen in Colombian TV series such as *Rosario tijeras* (Maillé 2005), *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (Bolívar 2010) or *El cartel de los sapos* (Moreno 2011). Faced with this situation, the Ka + Jana Uai school has insisted on incorporating participants' realities into the study of audio-visual language:

"Amazonian women have been abused since colonisation. They were raped in front of their children; their babies were cut out of their bellies so others would be scared and bring more rubber or *coca*" (Kuiru 2020).

Films that have been given awards or critical acclaim include the indigenous figure only to be part of the landscape, or in the best of cases, to be used as a secondary character who allows the main white bourgeois Western and heterosexual character reach their objective. Because of this submission to the Western script canon, the histories that have shaped the memory of indigenous women (of which most are painful, marked by torture, and go back to the era of conquest and colonialization) remain invisible, as happens with *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Guerra 2015). Kuiru nuances,

"this film puts in the anthropologist to talk about the indigenous woman as if the elders were not there and were not able to talk from their own knowledge—being the heads of household. Things become blurred when an outsider comes and explains things according to their own thoughts, but they do so as if this were our reality" (*Ibid*).

In contrast, the kind of documentary offered by Renacer y Memoria has been established as a new contribution to the country's kind of filmmaking, given that as the plot develops, the action unfolds in sections that are sung. This style is not like that in Colombian music documentaries, which focus on the biography of groups or individuals and covers a musical range that spans rock, pop, tropical, chamber and folk music. Examples include *Lucho, el documental* (Lucho, the Documentary; Arias 2013) and *Pasos de cumbia* (Cumbia Steps; Cavallo 2017). Singing and orality occur in all the community's daily activities: when washing clothes, going to the *chiva*[16] or the river, when looking after the children and the dead. Orality includes storytelling, listening to women elders speak of myths and legends, teaching utterances for rituals, accompanying all kinds of rites with words, encounters and disagreements in the community; in general, everything related with the spoken transmission of the community's memory and history. As Nuwanda says,

"It is impossible for us to do a documentary piece that is not linked to



"Listen to this song that we women sing."



Keeping possessions in a hammock so as to ward off termites.

singing. The academy criticises this option, saying, 'are you going to do a sung documentary every time?' It is not that we are going to do a musical every time; it is that our reality is sung. The songs should not be read as pauses to dramatise the story, as accessory humming of the tune, or pieces to create an atmosphere or give tempo to the story, because their words denounce what is happening in the territory [and] they are the personification of the community and particularly its feminine subject. Singing is done to not forget, because by not forgetting, there is healing. Film is yet another medium through which to communicate from [participants'] ancestral traditions, to have the chance of recalling a moment whenever this is necessary. Neighbours are greeted with singing, an improvised *copla* cheers up working, and for generations it has been women that create and recreate verses that become emptied of content when brought to white or mixed-race audiences" (2020).

Polifonía begins with the verse "listen to this song that we women sing" and continues with the chorus of Reborn. The song is envisaged as a vehicle for self-narration and thread, a mise-en-scène that allows the spectator to come and go the moment the collective script is created. Each "reborn" puts forward a lead that can play the character of midwife, miner, singer, elder and farmer:

"I'm the midwife, from here in the region, with a mission to conserve tradition. When the lady takes time, I do a supplication, asking Jesus Christ for birth without complication." [17]

The midwife is attending to a pregnant woman while we listen to a song which narrates another part of this story. These scenes are interspersed with an interview, and at the end of the sequence we discover that the person singing is the midwife herself. This narrative structure is kept for each sequence. The filmmakers are in front of the camera in dialogue with their interviewees, or their participation is made clear off camera. The image alludes to the multi-role concept I mentioned previously—the rotation of tasks (directing, production, sound and camerawork)—and the collective creation of the script. [18] Furthermore, the school uses native languages for its audio-visual productions, subtitled in Spanish. This choice assists preserving these languages and opens the door to local professionals taking on roles in post-production, which is carried out in Leticia (a city in southern Colombia that borders Brazil and Peru) or Bogotá.

In 2018, the school accessed state resources to create a short documentary centred on women's voices. Later, these formed part of the first television series made by indigenous communities called *El buen vivir* (the indigenous idea of living harmoniously with others and the Earth; 2019-2020).[19] Women and men from the school formed part of the production and directing team. They collectively decided that for the series, Spanish be mixed with the Ticuna language.[20] Also, the story chooses mixed Amazonian legends spun around the cassava (a sacred food for Amazonian communities) and women's role in creating the world. This idea was based on a brainstorming in which the community's grandparents participated.

The use of off camera sound is notable in the school's productions. They play with the sounds of the jungle and the words of elders, enhance the singing of birds or the running of the river with the sounds of women's chores in the *chagra*,[21] pulling up the yuca, and then using a mortar to process it. A symphony is created that allows us to imagine a typical day for these women. And the films offer a nod to the communities who know what it means for a bird to sing in the midafternoon or why the river flow is so strong that it can be listened to in the *chagra*.



Nelly Kuiru of Ka + Jana Uai editing.



interview made by the film crew of *Raa: Plants of Wisdom to Harmonize the World* with Jessica Isabel Gonzáles, one of the camerapersons.



Both the educational processes and audio-visual products of the two schools blend the women's typical lives and their way of perceiving their surroundings and reality. They give a chance to make their voice heard, to commend the most endearing of their lives, as well as demonstrate their disapproval regarding the way they traditionally have been put on screen.

Distribution: a new cycle begins

Despite there being several independent distribution channels, rural people rarely have access to films that explore other ways of telling a story. This is because the alternative channels often are reduced to festivals, special events, or TV streaming platforms. As a result, access to such audio-visual screenings is limited to the urban population. In the rural areas, cinema is seen mainly on television or through the screening of blockbuster or well-known films—as been indicated. Therefore, the distribution efforts performed by these schools is fundamental for film education, as the schools allow seeing audio-visual work with which other narratives can be imagined. Furthermore, distribution and screening of alternative films contribute to audio-visual literacy as an emancipatory vehicle. Taking into account the technological possibilities of their specific contexts, the Ka + Jana Uai and Renacer y Memoria schools have opted for open distribution of their productions, often through copying DVDs and giving them out to local people.

They also prefer consumption of people's own production, which they see as essential. They do not feel their work is included in the national cinematic product, which tends to homogenise narratives, bodies and places, and is "lacking in diversity" (Kuiru 2020) when compared with the country's real complexity. The short films go back to the communities of origin, seeking to complete the process of self-recognition onscreen, which they see as fundamental to de-colonising the gaze. The task is not easy for either group as a great deal of the process is self-managed. In the case of the Amazonian school, screening periods depend on access to a power source as electricity is not available in the communities. Other difficulties derive from the weather conditions. For example, in the dry season it is difficult to walk through the jungle loaded with equipment; and when this is possible, it requires a lot of time and is dangerous.

The audio-visual school Renacer y Memoria has made eight documentary films (short and medium-length films). Its audio-visual production can be characterised as ethnographical, anthropological or documentary film—broadly defined. Stylistically, it involves bringing together elements such as landscape, dress and music. Meanwhile the figurative meaning is cared for by checking it step by step with its subjects, in order to recreate painful memories and propose a space for healing. The groups' films are designed for their own communities and incorporate film-discussion activities for educating audiences at their schools. As a second step in the distribution process, they aim to reach the city by finding contacts in areas settled by uprooted people of African descent and "working from affection" (Valencia 2020) in order to attain dialogue with people outside the territory.

The concern over the dominant cinema raised by these audio-visual training schools has led them to attempt to enter funding, distribution and screening circuits aimed at professional cinema productions. For example, the series *El buen vivir* was created out of the demand by Amazonian communities to be included in the official Colombian filmography, and was funded with grants and awards from the Public Media System. The series was nominated for India Catalina prizes at the Cartagena de Indias International Film Festival 2020—one

Ka+jana uai has community screenings and discussions about films and media messages, here in their school in La Chorrera, Amazonas.

of the country's most important film festivals. It also was one of the most-watched series on Canal Trece (state TV channel). As regards *Polifonía*, this was the winner of the "Communication and Memory" Grant from the Señal Colombia channel in 2018. This allowed it to be included in the channel's programming schedule and also to participate in festivals such as the Bogotá International Documentary Film Festival, in which it received a special commendation.

The purpose behind the two collectives' desire to participate in these two spaces is to reach as many distribution and screening platforms as possible—meaning audiences. Because information about and access to these productions is limited, they find in Public TV circuits an opportunity to reach a new public. For instance, *Polifonía* is still available in the public media system and Renacer y Memoria has had the opportunity of showing the documentary to other people of African descent who have been uprooted from their territories, as was the case with hundreds who migrated from southern Colombia to the city of Bogotá or to other territories. Likewise, thanks to the *El buen vivir* series, Ka + Jana Uai has been able to link up with other indigenous peoples from Colombia and Latin America. Entering ito the public media system and other arenas that traditionally have belonged to hegemonic communities is a way of resisting, breaking with being interpreted in terms of otherness.

Conclusions

The first indigenous and peasant school for communication was created in the seventies. [22] Five decades went by before rural communities in Colombia could access resources to do their own audio-visual creation. We do not know how long it will take for feminist proposals to become consolidated in mainstream Colombian cinema but important changes are already taking place. Among these, alongside the schools' demanding that women have greater access to technical roles, cinema's place in transforming culture is being rethought. In these two schools' audio-visual stories, three aspects can be underlined in particular. First, putting the collective as the foundation of filmmaking. Second, self-management as a response to indigenous mediamakers' precarious access to public or public-private funds. Third, to turn to the ancestral to build a new kind of self-identity.

In regards to the first aspect, in the two schools, community participation occurs through filmic experiments. The filmmaking process includes setting up regular spaces for discussion between learners and trainers, thereby fully transforming the final cut. Although this results in many films left unfinished, the methods enable reaching their goal: this audio-visual education is not just about explaining something but about understanding filmmaking and how each gaze can tell a different story. The process has broken with the idea that what you see on the screen is the truth; correspondingly it casts doubt on any pyramidal creation of films, as the script, directing and editing roles fall on many people.

Furthermore, people learn how to establish a meeting point between the collective and self-management I found that such an organisational process is fundamental since we are "faced with the need to question the Euro-centric Western legacy" (Quijano 1998) and not just create a strategy to resolve production problems. This kind of pedagogy is about learning how to create a space or time in which social or personal issues can be calmly discussed, without the fear of asking about standards or roles. Likewise, the organisational process, due to the relevant statutes, encourages a rotation of responsibilities. That is, each participant can take on the role of director, producer, or any other in the production. The resulting coming together to achieve a common goal allows the women to learn how to set up processes with a political impact—ranging from micro-level ones in their families to designing and implementing public policies focused on using and appropriating the audio-visual as an emancipatory tool.





The values of local screenings accompanied by discussions.

Third, to search to recognize the ancestral opens the door to other ways of naming ourselves. These collectives adopt the term "Abya Yala." Such a naming brings up to date the problematisation of the concept of Latin America as suggested by Muyolema:

"mother—Abya Yala—woman as an alternative civilisational reference point, radically other even though she might seem an 'archaic utopia' under the perverse interpretation that it aims for a return to the past (...), is a possible word, a viable cultural alternative in the contemporary world" (2001, 24).

These Abya Yala feminists encourage reading our reality from the point of view of these women "others"—those from the periphery, those who have been silenced by a centralist and careerist society, and those deeply hit by the war. On becoming aware that reality does not change by itself, one must intervene in production and the means of production as a required condition to create one's own stories. These kinds of stories allow consolidating emancipatory paradigms to lead to building a new horizon, paving the way to hope and liberation through audio-visual means that seek strengthening participant's identities and that carry a profound meaning. This is about the iron will to defend the right to communication in a country that often makes such women neglected and invisible.[23]

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Notes

- 1. The National Commission for Communication of Indigenous Peoples (CONCIP), together with several organisations of the same nature and state representatives, led the round table that created the Public Policy for Colombian Indigenous Peoples' Own Communication (PPCPI). https://concip.mpcindigena.org/images/documentos/politica_publica_comunicacion_indigena_concip.pdf [return to page 1]
- 2. Some of the film-discussion and cinema-club collectives I came across during my research were as follows: Bunkuanarua—the Wiwa people's communication process—in the Sierra de Nevada de Santa María mountain range in Colombia's Caribbean region; Tejido de Comunicación ACIN (ACIN Communication Fabric) -CRIC (the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca), which probably was one of the greatest legacies of the process started by documentary filmmaker Marta Rodríguez in the seventies; Cine Comunitario de Siloé (Siloé Community Cinema), a mainly Afrodescendant group from the city of Cali, which takes place in one of the city's most violent areas; Ojo al Sancocho (Eye on the Stew), held in southern Bogotá's Ciudad Bolívar—a locality characterised as being one of the focal points for receiving migrants escaping Colombia's long social and political conflict; the Colombian Caribbean region's Colectivo de Comunicaciones de los Montes de María (Montes de María Communications Collective)—one of the villages hardest hit by paramilitary activity; La Fémina Direkta, an urban process created by La Direkta communications and which operates in Bogotá and Cali, in Colombia, and Rosario, Argentina, among other places.
- 3. "Red zone" is a concept coined in 1890 during the building of the US railroad system and used colloquially in war zones to denote the places of greatest potential for conflict as a result of confluence between multiple parties involved in war. For this study I used data from the monitoring of conflicts performed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Colombia.
- 4. These groups live in territories in which harassment by legal and illegal armed groups is unending and the community has suffered tortures, forced disappearances and conscription, rapes, and all kinds of ill-treatment corresponding to the war suffered in Colombia.
- 5. The mentioned System encompasses public TV, radio, press, and on-line media.
- 6. The southern regions of Amazonas, Putumayo and Caquetá.
- 7. ASOM was formed as a response to the war, in order for the women to remain in the territory by finding economic alternatives that would help them grow. It has over 200 women associates (peasant farmers, miners and midwives). https://asombuenosaires.weebly.com/
- 8. A trans-feminist group in which participants talk about sexual and gender violence, inquire theoretically into lesbo-feminism and especially black and decolonial feminism, allowing them to understand the intersectionality between

race, class and sexuality and incorporate this knowledge into their training processes.

- 9. Colombia's Ministry of Culture, through Proimágenes—the institute responsible for managing policy and state funds to promote cinematography in the country, has done a mapping of the audio-visual eco-system in Colombia. Production companies and individuals form part of this directory in accordance with recognition in the form of awards from the Film Development Fund or for audio-visual productions accessing distribution on private or public channels, among other things. This can be consulted at https://www.proimagenescolombia.com.
- 10. Interview with Laura Valencia / Nuwanda, online, 24 October 2020.
- 11. Interview with Kelly Kuiru, online, 15 May 2020.
- 12. The "word circle" is a millenary tradition used by indigenous peoples in Colombia. Its goal is to pass on knowledge preserved by the spoken tradition. A ceremony is held in which fire, tobacco, *hayo* (coca leaf), *chicha* (fermented drink) and food is to be shared. Once these elements are gathered together, a circle is formed, presided over by a woman elder, who hands over medicine. In this case it is the word with the *hayo* and tobacco so that participants can put them in their mouth and savour them slowly ("mambear"—meaning to lay down the word). This process observes the following order: listening, asking and thinking. Afterwards, consensual agreement on all of the meeting issues is reached. The word circle is thus a way of conserving their traditions as well as being mindful of one's origins, ancestors, and the importance of respecting the present moment in order to build the pillars for a good fate.
- 13. These are the community's grandmothers. They are greatly respected and cared for. Many are survivors of a disappeared generation because of the country's domestic armed conflict. They are an inspiration, safekeeping ancestral memory and remembrance about the territory by having stayed in the area despite suffering repeated hurt at the hands of different armed parties. [return to page 2]
- 14. Interview with Laura Valencia / Nuwanda, online, 24 October 2020.
- 15. Interview with Kelly Kuiru, online, 15 May 2020.
- 16. A large and colourful bus that is a commonly used form of transport in the Cauca. In Bogotá it is used as a tourist attraction but in many other places, as a means of transport.
- 17. The adapted words of the song *La Partera* (the Midwife), written and sung by Eunice—one of the main subjects of the documentary *Polifonía*.
- 18. This way of making films is an alternative to the audio-visual production processes that take place in the film industry. In these, strict hierarchies are imposed, from screenwriting to post-production, and it is demanded that the team "heads" make the decisions.
- 19. TV documentary series directed by eight men and a woman—Nelly Kuiru. Each episode consists of three stories created, filmed and produced in different Colombian indigenous villages.
- 20. Amazonian language.
- 21. Family farm patch to which is applied a system of rotational horticulture; combining growing root vegetables, fruit and medicinal plants. It is the foundation for community organisation in the Amazon.

22. Marta Rodríguez, one of the most important documentary-makers in Colombia, founded the spaces for indigenous communities' audio-visual education in northern Cauca to accompany the CRIC (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca).

23. I would like to thank Sonia Kerfa, Lorena Cervera and Marcela Labrador for their careful reading of this text and their suggestions that allowed to me to enrich it.

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LASTESIS Senior brought together women of different generations who flocked to perform "A Rapist in Your Path" in front of the National Stadium. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpIHsXoJAkk

LASTESIS' transnational monster

by Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto



LASTESIS SENIOR, the massive performance of "Un violador en tu camino" held at the National Stadium in Santiago de Chile, December 4, 2019. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpIHsXoJAkk

My mother performed LASTESIS' feminist intervention "Un violador en tu camino" (A Rapist in Your Path) with her daughter-in-law and mother-in-law at the entrance of the National Stadium in Santiago, Chile.[1] [open endnotes in new window] This massive iteration of the viral performance was known as LASTESIS Senior, and my mother, who is over sixty years old, was one of the estimated four to six thousand women who arrived at the Stadium. The performance took place during the demonstrations that began in October 2019 against the structural inequalities that plague one of the most unequal and neoliberal countries in the world. Commonly known as "el estallido" ("the social outburst"), this unprecedented uprising was met with brutal State repression that mutilated demonstrators' eyes using rubber bullets and pellets, and in many cases the police also sexually abused women.





LASTESIS' "Un violador en tu camino" travelled rapidly to the North and was performed in The Mission at San Francisco, California, December 10, 2019.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWe8ZAt1OmM

A few days later, my Catalonian and Mapuche girlfriends and I, a Chilean, performed "Un violador en tu camino" in Dolores Park in the Mission District of San Francisco with a group of around fifty women. Our own iteration was much smaller than the one held in the National Stadium, but our racialized bodies of mostly Latin American women who came together in solidarity with the peoples of Chile disturbed the quiet landscape of what was once a historically Latinx barrio and today is one of the most gentrified neighborhoods of the Bay area.

The South-North trajectory that I describe here signals the rapid circulation of this feminist performance created by LASTESIS, which swiftly travelled through social media across the Americas and beyond, despite being culturally and politically grounded. First staged by dozens of women in the Chilean port of Valparaiso as a response to patriarchal violence, the performance resonated powerfully with women all around the globe.



This map developed by Geochicas, a feminist collective of cartographers, shows the places in which "Un violador en tu camino" has been performed around the world. Each pin on the map at the website below has a link to where you can see a video of the performance in that place. Last updated May 5, 2022. Source: https://geochicas.org/index.php/que-hacemos/proyectos/mapa-un-violador-entu-camino/

The performance itself is built on elements that can be learnt quickly—the lyrics ("The oppressive State is a rapist male," "And it was not my fault, or where I was, or how I was dressed"); a choreography not difficult to grasp (a few minutes of practice would suffice as perfection was not a goal); a DIY gown (a black blindfold plus a sexy outfit one might wear to go out at night); and a sticky techno yet martial tune. This deceitful simplicity made this performance mushroom from Chile to Mexico, from Mozambique to France on a scale that still surprises its creators. It had a self-organizing dimension, not "owned" by its creators but



Click on link to hear LASTESIS' take on the song "Corazones rojos" by the popular Chilean band Los Prisioneros. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viy TRKksNdA&t=10s



LASTESIS' "Hoy, hundimos el miedo," performed in Valparaíso to commemorate the popular uprising of October 2019 with a group of people wearing black veils who threw the current Constitution of Chile into the ocean. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=bq8Wbxx5NHQ

instead open to reappropriation and adaptation. The performance's radical intersectionality and inclusiveness helped transform "Un violador en tu camino" into a transnational phenomenon. As Noelia Figueroa Burdiles asserts, "Un violador en tu camino" was a pedagogical project of feminist communication that became a veritable "transcultural ritual," which went well beyond identity politics and enabled a polyphonic denunciation against sexual violence regardless of age, class, race, or ethnicity (271-273).

The group LASTESIS is an interdisciplinary feminist collective created in 2018 in Valparaiso, Chile, by Daffne Valdés, Paula Cometa, Lea Cáceres and Sibila Sotomayor. They come from different artistic backgrounds but share the need to bridge the gap between feminist theory and practice and to bring the work of influential feminist thinkers such as Silvia Federici, Virginie Despentes and Rita Segato to wider audiences (hence the group's name: *las tesis* means "the theses" in English). They work using different media and artistic practices, from music videos to performances in public spaces. The group describes their method as a "collage"—a concept drawn from the visual arts which enables them to avoid hierarchies as they create a synthesis of a given idea through images.

The collaborative aspect is fundamental in their project. They explain that as a group they function within a non-hierarchical structure. In addition, in their projects they strive to articulate the collective dimension of art in an expansive way; this principle translates most evidently to the open calls they do inviting women and sexual dissidents to join their performances. They see themselves as a channel that brings women together (as an inclusive category) using feminist, queer and decolonial perspectives.[2]

The collective's most renowned work is the aforementioned public performance, "Un violador en tu camino," but they have also remained active during the pandemic. LASTESIS have made music videos (a remade of Los Prisioneros's anti-*machista* anthem "Corazones rojos" [Red Hearts]) and created performances such as "Hoy, hundimos el miedo" (Today, We Drown the Fear). This intervention commemorated the popular uprising of October 2019 with a group of people wearing black veils and who threw the current Constitution of Chile imposed by Pinochet into the ocean. Under quarantine, they took advantage of the new aesthetic possibilities brought about by online platforms such as Zoom and created "Nos roban todo, menos la rabia" (They Steal Everything from Us, Except Our Rage), a powerful collaborative video-performance that emerged as a response to the increase of domestic violence during the pandemic.



LASTESIS' "Nos roban todo, menos la rabia," made under lockdown during Covid-19, visibilized the increase of domestic violence suffered during the

pandemic. Click on link to see video. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzwYRB8cAxk

We are pleased to reproduce here a preview of the forthcoming English translation of their book *Quemar el miedo: Un manifiesto* (written in collaboration with journalist Alejandra Carmona and originally published in 2021 by Planeta), which will be released by Verso in 2023. Although the publication is framed as a *manifesto*, they would rather think about this book as an invitation to dialogue and a call to intervene in the world:

"When they told us they wanted us to write a manifesto, we said that manifestos are truths, point by point; they are precepts, and we have more questions than answers. Our invitation is to dialogue, to debate and eventually, a call to action, while bearing in mind that feminism is plural: it's feminisms" ("LASTESIS: 'El feminismo no es una meta'").

In the chapter that we reproduce here, LASTESIS reflect on interconnected issues, including

- the indissoluble bond between art and activism;
- the unexpected and enormous repercussion that "Un violador en tu camino" had in the world, which demonstrated at once the enormous "potencia" (potency) of performance and the widespread problem of sexual violence; and
- the complex relation that they themselves have with academia, which they see as a fundamentally patriarchal structure.

They conclude by affirming their commitment with the ever growing "transcontinental monster" that the internationalist feminist movement has become.

Notes

- 1. This was a highly symbolic place to stage the performance as the National Stadium was used as a concentration camp and a torture center during the early days of Pinochet's dictatorship. [return to text]
- 2. These paragraphs are largely based on LASTESIS presentation of their work in "Disidencia y Resistencia: A Conversation with LASTESIS," organized by Alicia del Campo and held virtually in CSU Long Beach on April 26, 2022.



Cover of the Spanish edition of LASTESIS' book Quemar el miedo (Planeta, 2021). We are pleased to publish an excerpt of this book in English translation.

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(Go to LASTESIS manifesto)

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

"A Rapist in your Path" is the title of the powerful performance by LASTESIS and staged by thousands of women around the world. This image was taken by Jorge Becerril in Mexico D.F., November 11th, 2019.



Picture of Feminist activism in Latinoamerica. Photo from the Spanish collective Sangre Fucsia who created a game called Feminisms United. https://sangrefucsia.wordpress.com/2019/11/21/comprar-feminismos-reunidos/

The Transformative Power of Performance

by LASTESIS

The patriarchy is a judge, who judges us for being born, and our punishment is the violence you don't see.

The patriarchy is a judge who judges us for being born, and our punishment is the violence you already see.

> It's femicide. Impunity for my murderer. It's the disappearances. It's rape.

And the fault wasn't mine, not of where I was or how I was dressed.
And the fault wasn't mine, not of where I was or how I was dressed.
And the fault wasn't mine, not of where I was or how I was dressed.
And the fault wasn't mine, not of where I was or how I was dressed.

The rapist was you.
The rapist is you.
It's the cops.
The judges.
The state.
The president.

The oppressor state is a sexist rapist.

The oppressor state is a sexist rapist.

The rapist was you.

The rapist is you.

Intervention song, "A Rapist in Your Path."



Taken from Kim Yari's Twitter (April 2022). The impact of the performance "A Rapist in Your Path" was felt throughout social media. The lyrics of the chorus are placed in the background.



From the poster of the premiere of Cartografía feminista, inaugurated the 8th of March 2022. Cartografía feminista arises from the need to value the performative power of words through the joint elaboration of a collective glossary.



Rita Segato, the feminist anthropologist whose

October 2019, LASTESIS collective

For us, there's a powerful and unbreakable bond between art and activism. Art is the language in which we have decided to work and express ourselves. What we do is not a hobby or entertainment, it's our work, our calling, to which we dedicate much of the time we don't spend working elsewhere in order to survive.

Nothing has been handed to us, no one finances us. People love to assume that, if a group of women artists is of any importance, it must be because someone helped them. Some organization must be behind it all, because it's impossible that four women could have created something, anything, of importance without being part of a bigger, generally sinister, plan. Working out of conviction rather than for money is unintelligible to neoliberal and patriarchal logic.

Our art work is constant. We think about it much of the time, looking for sources of inspiration and provocation in our daily lives, seeking to expand our mental library of role models and references. Life without this search for the inspiring work of others is one of meager interiority, and we fight against mental and creative destitution. It's the least we can do to honor so much past and present courage.

We are writing this book today thanks to everyone who fought so that we could enter other spaces. To inhabit, even for a short period of time, historically masculinized spaces, denied to other subjectivities. Spaces in which our voices, our demands, our complaints, our ideas can be heard. It is curious that even today so many people are horrified by the deployment of feminism in public spaces. But it's an ancient discussion. We could see it already when women began to wear pants in the nineteenth century and slowly and timidly entered certain masculinized spaces: the fear was widespread.

Even the street, that place that seems so obviously public, is limited. Take "A Rapist in Your Path," for example. A performance, a song, a choreography made for women and dissidents: Why does it cause such a stir? Why do government representatives and the press need to weigh in on it, to say something, anything, about it? Why is it commented on, attacked but also shared on social media networks? This reaction affirms that we are battling for public space, even today. Battling to exist, to appear, to raise our voice.

To speak is an everyday act, one we do all the time with friends, family, acquaintances, strangers. But when we do it as a collective, in the streets, in public spaces, it carries a certain weight, a distinct potential. Women and dissidents in the streets fighting for and from their bodies, through performance, still disturbs

work inspired "A Rapist in Your Path." "Rape is not a sexual act, it is an act of power, of domination, it is a political act". https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-50735010



LASTESIS' performance has also entered the classroom. Students of the Master 2 Hispanic Arts, at the University of Grenoble Alpes staged the performance as an important landmark in the history of women's struggles in Latin America. December 7th, 2021. The students' performance is staged in front of a screen which also projects the performance in a kind of *mise-en-abyme*.



Group portrait of the LASTESIS collective, published in the feminist magazine *Pikara* (Spain).

people.

Feminist struggle runs through us, and it has run through us all our lives. Perhaps there were times where we didn't have the words for it, because we didn't know what feminism was, but we know and recognize it today. As artists, it was a natural trajectory to end up articulating feminist demands and ideas through art; as artists, our work revolves around politics. And the personal is the political.

With this idea in mind, at the beginning of 2018, we had the precious and rare opportunity to debut this collective project. We first thought about it from the framework of the performing arts, but in a matter of weeks realized that we needed an interdisciplinary vision, one that could combine and integrate the performing arts with other artistic mediums in order to better spread our ideas.

Our objective was and is to disseminate feminist theory. This desire comes from our own lack of access to these ideas through formal education. We fervently believe that the translation of feminist ideas into other languages, approaching them not only theoretically and linguistically but also visually, audibly, and corporeally, contributes to their broader distribution.

We put ourselves to work and in a few months presented our first piece: an interdisciplinary, feminist performance collage. Demands and theories embodied by four different artists with an industrial and kitsch aesthetic. We used the structure of a collage because it organizes all the different elements in a nonhierarchical, nonlinear way. Collage combines elements and puts them in a similar plane of importance, and it is the task of the observer to decide what to look at and in what order, what to salvage and even what to cast aside. For us, every part of the scene conveys information, reiterates and builds on the main ideas, and even makes space for humor. We don't have to be serious just because we're feminists.

"Feminists are serious, killjoys, boring, misandrists, idiots, crazy, they have tattoos and short hair." We are tired of constantly hearing and reading about this stereotype of the feminist, the "feminazi," as if we wanted to commit genocide or exterminate men. That antisocial person that wants to destroy society, kill half of the population, and seize power. It must be hard to see your enemy and not assume that she would do exactly what you would. Oppression, violence, and the fight for power are weapons of the patriarchy and we're not interested. You can shove it and stop trying to fit us into your stupid paradigms, because, to quote a wise woman, we are not fodder for *hueones*, idiots.



The Chilean feminist collective in a picture taken by Canela Laude-Arce for the fanzine co-created by Censored Magazine and LASTESIS. Laude-Arce is a French-Peruvian photographer and writer, working on stories related to feminism, gender and political activism. https://www.canelalaude.com/10103689-publications



LASTESIS with raised hands, symbol of their concrete praxis. Photograph by Canela Laude-Arce.



Focus on the collective performing "A Rapist in Your Path." Photograph from the website Pigraï 'Flair. La culture a du sens [Culture makes sens].



Map included in the chapter "The history of Latin American feminism" written by Anabela Croce Martinez and published in *La Mosquitera*, *Comunicación popular*. https://lamosquitera.org/historia-del-feminismo-latinoamericano/



During the 2019 social outburst in Chile there were massive demonstrations in Santiago with a high participation of feminist activists. The green handkerchief, symbol of the right to abort (originally used in Argentina), was commonly seen in these demonstrations. Photograph: Sabine Greppo.

Art is the battle trench from which we will wage our war of resistance, and we do not tire of saying it. We believe in the transformative power of art and performance. Art by bodies for bodies, collective art reclaimed through communal experiences. It was an idea we had been thinking about and finally materialized when we created "A Rapist in Your Path."

The massive adoption of our song-dance-performance, our intervention, is something that moves us enormously to this day. It was not something we went looking for or even imagined. It was a total and complete surprise that has been both very wonderful and very concerning. Wonderful because we are now part of an underground network of women and dissidents who don't adhere to national, cultural, or linguistic borders. The power is beautiful; a true gift. Nevertheless, it also shows us how the problem cuts across these lines, that sexual violence, like all types of patriarchal violence, is international.

It has been beautiful to see that in performance exists the beginning of an answer to the problem, at least in the raising of demands and denunciations. The performances reaffirm that putting our bodies on the line together legitimizes the historical demands of intersectional feminism. What comes next? We don't know yet. We have more questions than answers, more doubts than certainties.

The popular response to our intervention probably has to do with the fact that we all share in common the personal experience of violence toward feminized bodies. Women and dissidents live this patriarchal violence, violence inscribed in our bodies. This is the root of the need to denounce structural violence on every continent, in this case, through performance and performativity.

This violence is directly related to the creation of the modern state, the ideological foundation that institutionally reproduces systemic violence against bodies and territories. In that same vein, the denunciation of "A Rapist in Your Path" from the right reflects ideas posited by Rita Segato (2003) and Virginie Despentes (2018), who provide a theoretical basis for what the patriarchy has called "whining." Thanks to them and all the inspiring feminists who have deeply and beautifully influenced our work, thanks to the material legacy of the disruptors of the past, today we are a fervently building a new common sense predicated on belonging together and the desire for change.

Given the few opportunities we have had to read feminist theory, our relationship to academia is bittersweet. On the one hand, we all have backgrounds in higher education—an education not exempt from challenges, as we were creating and working to finance our studies—and, today, some of us even work in universities. On the other hand, this also showed us that there is a distinct lack of feminist theory in courses of formal study. The hegemony of white, male, cis-hetero, Western thought is generalized. Epistemological, methodological, historical, and theoretical violence is imposed under the guise of freedom of academic departments. Rotten accounts are reiterated and narratives that do not represent us are shored up.

How do we combat this? With action, not just critique. That is what we try to do. To fill those gaps and hopefully reach more people with these ideas, outside the hegemony of the text, of the word. This process also constitutes study, but it doesn't adhere to the regulatory and rigid standards of an "academic" investigation. We aren't trying, nor are we looking, for academic approval. Academia, fundamentally patriarchal, also requires a profound reconfiguration from the roots, as all historical institutions do.

The egos of academics are so big that they truly believe they know much more than others do, when actually they're the ones who lack a solid foundation. There



Demonstration against feminicides in Buenos Aires. The image features the slogan and hashtag #NiUnaMenos ("NotOneLess"). Photograph by Mariana Greif for Reuters, published in the French newspaper *Libération*, in December 2020



Young feminists against the murders of women. Wearing shorts, they painted blood on their bodies which become a vehicle of expression. Photograph: Sabine Greppo.



In Valparaiso, LASTESIS in front of the police station ("carabineros"). LASTESIS were denouncing the action taken by the institution against them for so-called "attack against authority" and "incitement to hatred and violence." Photograph: Camille Audibert. March, 31, 2020

are many different ways of knowing. What is it with throwing the names of authors and publications in people's faces to validate your superiority? As if citations were representative of the highest wisdom on the planet, when in reality no one will ever be able to absorb all the information in the world before they die. What we need is to do something with the information available to us now, to stimulate other minds and unleash an unstoppable domino effect.

Academic feminism taken to the streets has had its effects on demands for justice in judicial cases of abuse and rape, which are generally stacked against women and survivors. More than once, pressure from feminists has been essential in winning some kind of resolution. Nevertheless, revictimization is constant, in hearings, in the media, and even in our own families. Incessant questioning of the abused is the first response after a complaint is filed—a reason many of us avoid channels of legal justice and appeal instead to social justice. Protest—criticized and devalued—is one of the only mechanisms we have left to protect ourselves as a community from potential future abuses and abusers.

We keep us safe—from abuse, yes, but also from guilt. It wasn't our fault. It wasn't my fault or your fault. Those responsible are the abusers, the accomplices, the silences. We also have to protect ourselves from stereotypes that determine whether we are good or bad victims. Because even after we die they sort us into good or bad victims.

A raped and/or murdered woman appears in the press if she is the daughter of a "good" family and behaves well in the eyes of society. But what happens when the victim is queer, trans, poor, an addict, or simply not so well "behaved"? She practically doesn't exist according to the media and, if she does, it's only to use her as an example of what you get when you ask for it, when you deserve what happens to you. In this sense, conservative and Christian morality continues to be very powerful, and feminists are its staunch enemies.

Those who feel that their power or privileges have been deeply questioned are the ones most fearful of feminism. And, in their privilege, they choose to ignore the oppressions that don't affect them, even if they wield them against others. But they also attack to preserve their privileges.

"I hope they get killed," "I hope they get raped," "they want to divide the social struggle," "this is an attack on the class struggle": these are some of the things we often hear, plus many other epithets about our ideas, our intellects, our bodies, our sexualities. In general, it has become "common" to be attacked for what you do and what you don't do. Having reached a high level of media exposure, we are expected to have something to say in response to any situation.

To defy normativity and question the privileges of some will always put you in an uncomfortable position, at the center of all kinds of attacks for trying to break out of your position of subordination. The response will be to attack, ridicule, minimize, infantilize you, treat you as ignorant, criticize your physical appearance, or whatever else they can use against you. We all have a long list of examples.

The traditional family table is a special gathering site for sexism, gender roles, stereotypes, and, of course, great secrets of sexual violence. To try to get others to see some of this, at the very least, earns you the label of drama queen.

Feminism is a long journey that can be traveled in different ways, depending on personal history. The path of some is steep and cobble-stoned—in no way easy to walk. That of others is paved and smooth. Others encounter forks in the road over



Screenshot of an institutional video of the carabineros hymn. Ironically, the lyrics of this song inspired the creation of "A Rapist In Your Path." https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=DMEZBe1ezh0



Women protesters hold pink crosses and brightly colored patchwork picture made by groups of women. Photograph: Sabine Greppo.



Performance staged in France at the Place de la Republique, an emblematic place for the people's demands. "A Rapist in Your Path" was performed on the occasion of a trip of LASTESIS to Paris. *Libération*, October, 10, 2022.

the years. Most likely, violence is the starting point for us all. Most likely, a friend invited us along the way, pointing to and nudging us down the road. At first they'll say you're too much, that you're seeing problems where there aren't any. That you're trying to distract people from the actually important issues with your second-class complaints.

If you report sexual, physical, or psychological violence, the response will almost always be more violence toward you. They'll probably treat you like you're crazy, attention-seeking, accuse you of wanting to screw up someone else's life, of being jealous of another woman. They'll blame you for all the world's ills, as they have done throughout history.

They will rub your face in your economic dependence on your father or husband, even if it's not true and you support yourself. And they will never grant you the privilege of being a thoughtful, creative, and independent being. They will wish you raped, locked in the kitchen, static, silent, and hopefully personable and diligent. They will wish you to be exploited for life. They will wish you dead.

They have wished us dead. They have wished us dead for creating and carrying out a performance. For singing and dancing with our friends to denounce historic violence. But there were others who thanked us, who saw themselves in the performance, made it their own and raised their own demands.

Strangely, many have used the word *success* to allude to our work. We hate it, because this supposed success came from a process that had no pretensions or intentions of being "successful." Instead of *success*, we think it has had a *social effect* that allows us to have a space to speak, to act. A space that carries responsibility and requires arduous work. In it, we have tried and will try to keep putting forward feminist demands, translating feminist theory, presenting our methodology. For now, this is how we think we can best contribute to art and activism.

When they ask us, "What comes next?," we always have the same answer: we plan to keep doing our art-activist work. To keep thinking about how to give shape to ideas, how to give artistic form to feminism's questioning of that which is assumed to be normal. To keep creating out of our diverse languages and bodies, to keep circulating feminist theory and our demands, our indictments. If we serve as a platform for all these voices, we will use it to the fullest. If you think we're "dumb," we don't care. We don't mind repeating the same thing over and over again, because there are still those who don't understand, whether because they can't or don't want to. The struggle is long and we are ready to keep going. We only hope that this feminist network, this transcontinental monster out of our control, grows immense and becomes impossible not to see; that it becomes impossible to avert your eyes or plug your ears, because our shouts will be so loud that they will echo around world.

Acknowledgements: LASTESIS, "The Transformative Power of Performance," Chapter 6 of their forthcoming book *Set Fear on Fire!*_Translated by Camila Valle, Verso, 2023. *¡Quemar el miedo!* © by LASTESIS, Editorial Planeta Mexicana, S.A. de C.V., 2023. In collaboration with Alejandra Carmona L. By agreement with Pontas Literary and Film Agency. Preface to the English edition © LASTESIS 2023. English language translation © Camila Valle 2023. We thank Verso for allowing us to reproduce a preview of this book.

JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Teresa Jiménez from Colectiva Lemow, Guatemala



Tirza Yanira Ixmucané Saloj Oroxom from Colectiva Lemow, Guatemala

Roundtable with visual artists: Afroféminas / Colectiva Lemow / Trenzar Perú

by Julia Cabrera (Afroféminas)
Teresa Jiménez and Tirza Yanira Ixmucané Saloj
Oroxom (Colectiva Lemow, Guatemala)
Alondra Flores and Cristina Renteros (Trenzar Perú)
Daniela Galán (moderator)

Transcribed by Maira Jiménez and translated by Edith Márquez Duque

- Afroféminas is an online community, platform, and magazine created by Antoinette Torres Soler in 2014. It is a safe space for African and Afrodescendant women. Its objective is to establish a dialogue from the perspective of racialized women.
- <u>Colectiva Lemow</u> was created by women who seek to make human rights, critical reflection, denunciation, and gender equality visible through artistic expressions. Through artistic and cultural content, it empowers, entertains, and creates community among underrepresented audiences in Guatemala and the world.
- **Trenzar Perú** is a Cultural Association created in 2016. It is a feminist and artivist space committed to themes of memory, gender identity, and human rights, using various artistic disciplines.



Zoom roundtable, April 20, 2021.

Daniela Galán: I am very excited about chairing this panel. We are going to talk with members of these three collectives and explore their work in the visual arts. The first collective is Trenzar Perú. We are accompanied by Alondra Flores, who is a feminist, environmental activist, manager of cultural events, and cofounder of



Alondra Flores from Trenzar Perú



Cristina Renteros from Trenzar Perú



Art Historian Daniela Galán



Julia Cabrera from Afroféminas

Trenzar; and Cristina Renteros, who is an artist in this cultural association. We are also accompanied by members of Colectiva Lemow. Teresa Jiménez is a filmmaker, communicator, and student of life, based in Guatemala; and Yanira is a sculptor and muralist. And, finally, we have the collective Afroféminas represented by Julia Cabrera who is an art historian, teacher, manager of cultural events, especially responsible for Afro-Spanish exhibitions.

Julia Cabrera: The creator of Afroféminas, Antoinette Torres Soler, is a philosopher, activist, and entrepreneur. She created Afroféminas in 2014 and she has also written a book and she has also written the book *Viviendo en modo afroféminas* (2018) that is related to this organization. Afroféminas seeks to disseminate and support the work and voice of Afro-descendants and racialized women. As a community it addresses different subjects, realities, and stories and it also maintains a digital media platform to give voice to those perspectives. Through our Internet site, https://afrofeminas.com, essays and articles are published by journalists, communicators, and other professionals. Our Internet platform and cultural work has gained recognition not only in Spain, where the collective has its headquarters, but also throughout the world, mainly in the Americas in countries like Colombia, where there are also headquarters.

Here are some examples of our cultural projects. "Do you know ..." aims to make visible Afro-descendant and racialized artists, but also from gender and LGBT perspectives. We also publicized the artistic initiatives and cultural projects of Afro-descendant artists and collectives; one of these collectives is The Black View, which is an association of African and Afro-descendant actresses, actors, and filmmakers. We set up interviews with artists like Spanish actress Montse Pla, but we also use interviews as a form of cultural activism, such as conversations with Carolina Benitez, one of our writers, or with Heny Cuesta, founder of Cimarron productions and TV/film director and producer. We find that interviews create a space for reflection around questions such as those asked by Doris Otis Mohand as to why aren't there greater and more diverse female artists? And we offer a gallery space for more visibility for African and Afro-descendant artists, such as Monserrat Anguiano. We have a store to disseminate this kind of art and culture and to pay the artists. We also do calls for artists, fairs, exhibitions, etc. Our project also disseminates the work of other art collectives and art research projects: we want to be an intellectual space to carry out new narratives of the history of art. The women who are part of the cultural section of Afroféminas come from different fields such as communication, philosophy, history, philology, and politics.

Teresa Jiménez: I am speaking from Guatemala. We are part of the Lemow Collective. This name means mirror or reflection in one of the Guatemalan languages. We are a collective that manages communication, art, and cinema. Our greatest resource is the audio-visual medium, so after eight years, we continue to express our emotions and tell real-life stories that we do not see particularly in film, whether fiction or documentary. We also work in art activism and disseminate our work on the Internet, especially in social media, which has been fundamental for our communication during this time.

Yanira Ixmucané: What a pleasure to see you and greet you! Tere and I are representing this collective today, but we have more partners: Verónica, Cleira,



The creator of Afrofeminas, Antoinette Torres Soler



One of the activities organized by Afroféminas.



Some of the women behind Afroféminas.

Kat, and Luisa. All of us come from different parts of Guatemala. In addition to audio-visual productions, there are several areas that we have been working in during this time: we want to create or transmit certain stories from different points of view, from the different realities of our various contexts. In addition to this, access to art in our communities and villages here in Guatemala is precarious. To address that, since 2013 we have developed itinerant exhibitions, traveling to villages and communities in Guatemala, bringing cinema and artistic training into various spaces. This work is mostly our social contribution done for free. At the moment we do not have much financing, but we know from our experience how creating art spaces has changed us and has helped us see other realities, especially by getting close to girls and boys and to women in their communities. So that is why we still manage these itinerant exhibitions. Furthermore, we are training filmmakers and emerging artists. We try to develop a space that is more open and that can bring together all the cultures that are part of Guatemala such as Xinca, the Garífuna, la mestiza, and the Maya. So we try to establish that diversity in our spaces. Art moves and motivates us, and I think we can do things that are really important because it is necessary to bring art closer to all places in the country.

Alondra Flores: Good morning comrades. Here in Peru it is still morning. How wonderful to meet you and listen to you all. I am very grateful for our collective because it is nourishing and it inspires us to continue working. I am Alondra Flores and I am part of Trenzar Perú, a collective of feminist activists since 2016 and a cultural association since last year. Before we became a collective, we had already been working together as friends. We named the collective Trenzar for two reasons. We feel "braiding" is a wonderful symbol and want the work of Trenzar to enact a constant braiding with different collectives and organizations, not only within the performing arts but also with promoting human rights. Furthermore, when we were little our grandmothers braided us. Thus, for us, it is a symbol of returning to our roots and keeping our ancestors' history alive. We work to strengthening the development of girls and adolescents in the construction of their gender identity, and to work with women to make gender violence visible.

Our country is a place hit hard on a daily basis by feminicides, disappearances, and violence. Our main job is to try to eradicate these. To do that, patriarchy must be eradicated from the small spaces to the large ones. Since we are performing artists, we study about the performing arts and theatre, we practice feminist activism, and we work from a pedagogy of community-based management. We do plays, workshops, festivals, interventions in the public spaces, and many such projects. I know that all the self-managed partners here will understand that sometimes we have to do everything. In other words, I really appreciate everything that Trenzar has taught me. I have learned more than during my five-year university degree in Performing Arts. Since the pandemic, we have more recently focused on working on virtual campaigns.

Christina Renteros: What Alondra says is really true for me, and I would like to point out that before Trenzar was created, we already self-managed collectively and we did other activities related to human rights. Additionally, the process up to today has been very interesting because along the way we have gone from being teenagers to being adults. Some of us have chosen to be mothers. We have made wise choices and also mistakes that have contributed to our vision and to how we approach the people with whom we braid virtually on the Internet. There have been many changes, many setbacks, but we are constantly searching to feel in touch together, *juntas* at all times.

Daniela Galán: Thank you all very much for your presentations. Listening to you, I see how many of you went from being a collective to being a cultural project



One of the activities organized by Afroféminas.



Traveling Exhibition by Lemow



Members of Colectiva Lemow.

or an association. I would like to explore what the differences between these two kinds of organizations are, how your projects evolve or not, or maybe what are the advantages of working as a group and the advantages of being considered a more formalized cultural project.

Teresa Jiménez: One of the advantages of working collectively is that we share knowledge with each other. Each one is a different being and has a different world, so we always learn from each other. That is the beauty of working collectively. Maybe, one of the disadvantages is that sometimes we don't know each other well and we hurt each other without meaning to do so because we are in the process of learning how to live in this community, right? Learning to identify emotions, feelings, getting to know each other, to know those varied worlds is not easy because we are many.



Traveling Exhibition by Lemow

Finding funding is also complicated, particularly in countries like ours, where art is not seen as important. So, it is complicated to get adequate funding and try to live from this; in fact, we cannot make a living from this. I always say that, on the one hand, we are developing our artistic projects and, on the other hand, we are looking for what to do for a living. We have found so many obstacles, but despite all, we continue little by little.

Daniela Galán: Before going to Yanira, I just want to touch upon what you said about the financial part as one of the key elements of working collectively, precisely one of the advantages of joining collective efforts is to obtain financial support, but such membership could also become the opposite, a disadvantage.

Teresa Jiménez: In our case, we have knocked on doors in our country, Guatemala, and we have received support, but it has been not much. We have currently international support from a fund in Nicaragua. It has supported us during all these years and, in this fight it has really trusted in what we do. I think we have had more support and visibility outside of Guatemala. Inside our own country, it has been really hard, but somehow we continue.







Trenzar Perú and their street theatre, "Borders

Yanira Ixmucané: In relation to your initial question, we never wondered if we wanted to be a platform, an association, or a collective. We have considered the possibility of being an association through legal recognition, which would also benefit us. Becoming an association is also a very complex process and many of us do not have much training or perhaps no university training, so we go stumbling along the way. I think that joining our efforts as a collective is important, because in that way we can rely on the skills of the others, and respecting and learning about the various spaces and diversity in our different cultural backgrounds. I think that working collectively has helped us break down certain barriers within our thinking, and to try other ways of living, creating, and feeling. We have been working together for almost eight years and it has been very difficult to obtain funding because we get told that in our countries even food and water are lacking. We are a very poor country. The funding priority is on those things. Art and even education are sometimes secondary. So, looking for funding for an art collective's work can be very difficult, regardless of whether you act individually or collectively.

Daniela Galán: In that sense Julia, how has your experience been in Spain with Afroféminas? What makes you a platform?

Julia Cabrera: I think the difference is that Afroféminas includes so many women. If you need Afroféminas, they are there to be your speaker, to support you and to spread your work. We are so many. For example, if you write a book, you can disseminate it via Afroféminas. So, our group's work exists for all racialized and Afro-descendant women. Financially, our situation is not that different from the Lemow collective. Art suffers everywhere, it relies mostly on voluntary collaborations.

Daniela Galán: Let's say that there are some differences amongst your collectives and platforms, not only in what you produce, but also in the themes you explore. Lemow is more a creative association of artists who have an interest in working together to develop collective projects. Afroféminas is more like a platform that promotes different areas of work; it's not only focused on the cultural aspect but also on different forms of dissemination. And Alondra, you talked previously about the shift that Trenzar is making as it moves from a collective to a platform. Could you expand on this?

Alondra Flores: For us, this was a really difficult decision. In fact, we reconsidered a lot of things about our process: we questioned the hierarchy and the role of each format. The background is this: an organization that we work with offers funding only to formally established collectives. So, we said, let's do it. Why? Because that opportunity opened doors for us to seek funding that we could not access otherwise. We could not do everything that we do if it weren't for the alliances we have. We are a self-managed organization and do not receive monthly funding. For me most difficult thing about working collectively is the need to always reach agreements because it takes a long time. Here's an example. We work with relatives of the victims of the armed conflict in our country. They are people who are around 70 years old, and have a different rhythm than ours, so the meetings with them are very long, but for us it is very important to listen to them because we are going to speak from their testimony and from their voice. Working with various collectives also entails waiting, listening, observing and dedicating more time than we probably would if we worked in a more hierarchical way.

In addition, Trenzar works as a platform for other partners. In fact, for two years we had rented a house that eventually we had to leave because it was self-

are invisible

managed and we couldn't continue paying for. At the same time, during those two years, many other collectives worked in this house. I don't know why I didn't mention it before, but well, I am a lesbian, and we work with the LGBTI+ community. In the month of Pride, we hold meetings, actions, we work on video performances and that also allows us to work with different identities, and collectives. For example, if we work on an activity involving trans women or trans men, it is essential for us that there is a trans person in the team, because I am a cisgender woman. It is also essential that whole groups join the campaigns and that their voices are heard, not just my dull voice. In fact, we always try not to be the same people who appear everywhere, but instead we invite colleagues from outside, so they can chair panels, etc.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Colectiva Lemow at the event "Connectivity and Community Communication in Forest Territories"

Cristina Renteros: In addition, we talk about how to politicize our conversations. I am the mother of two kids, so we also talk collectively about raising them and we discuss the demands of kids too. Alondra mentioned how important it is to listen to all the voices and I realize that as a collective, we feel very happy with what we have achieved and we are discovering that each voice is very important. We are open to listening what everyone else has to say. We are also developing a new perspective within the collective in this pandemic situation because there are people with whom, unfortunately, we are not as close as before, and we are looking for ways to connect again and listen to each other and continue working in this way. At this time, it has become very important that we can also work as a platform for other organizations, for other collectives.

In addition, it nourishes us. In this way, our love and our decision to work with the collective comes from seeing the importance of helping each other in our own families. For example, I am the daughter of a woman who raised me with three other women. This arrangement was not just about surviving day by day, but also about transferring and developing critical tools with which to challenge the status quo. I think that our love for working collectively makes us move forward constantly.

Daniela Galán: You establish the importance of these new narratives in the visual arts.Based on your own artistic project, your narratives, and the different backgrounds you come from, I wanted to ask those from Lemow's collective about how or what you understand as visual art.

Teresa Jiménez: I think the most interesting thing with our collective is that we have different points of view, we live in different contexts. It is this mix of different views that makes our platform particularly visual.

Yanira Ixmucané: There is a way and a model of making art productions that is





Colectiva Lemow at the event "Connectivity and Community Communication in Forest Territories"



Afroféminas.



María Roa Borja © Photography by Margarita Restrepo.



taught in schools or by comrades who have formal training. Against that model, we have understood that cinema, for example, is a communitarian effort. We come from communities with different ways of life where the established production model does not apply, so we have to generate other models, break certain rules, because it is necessary to create other ways of doing. Our idea is also to make a type of cinema that is participatory and that is not invasive. We have noticed, especially the Mayan comrades, that filmmakers from other places or with other visions come to film in our communities. Obviously, they can film here, but we also have the right to present our reality from our point of view. Because sometimes we do not feel represented in what we see. Production models need to be modified sometimes, and that is what we try to do. We propose other forms of production, adapting to the contexts and involving the community. For example, if you are going to be in a space where there is a Garifuna community, you have to be involved in the Garifuna community because you cannot speak on behalf of them. And that is why we also believe that it is important to train our comrades, men and women, from the communities so that they can also film from their own perspective. So we are going to change the rules of the game a little bit, because it is necessary and important that they change.

Daniela Galán: It seems very important to me. The proposals that you make, which are not only related to changing what we understand as art from a conceptual point of view, but also in the art-making methodology. We are used to certain types of methodology that are quite Eurocentric. Julia, as an art historian, what is your perspective on this and in relation to Afroféminas?

Julia Cabrera: We want to rethink museum narratives and also historiography. I talk about Spain because it is the country where I am from and where I live. Curatorial modes are sexist, racist, xenophobic, and against the LGBTI community. The old methodology still persists. Museums focus on white historiography. There are generations of people emerging in the arts who do not question anything and who reproduce the same ways of doing and thinking. The European white man established as art, painting, architecture, etc; but we see that in other parts of the world, art and culture can also be considered to be hair, flower art, writing, singing, or other artistic expressions. Even today, Spanish museums persist in colonialist views, and that attitude is something that must be made visible and we must be aware of. This is what Afroféminas engages with. It is a form of activism that is very important for education, for history. Also it is somehow political.

Daniela Galán: Definitely. There are certain types of artistic endeavors that are still considered lesser, such as handicrafts.

Julia Cabrera: Totally. An initiative that I have engaged in with all my heart is at the National Museum of Anthropology in Madrid. I led a project about making visible the work of creative women and one of them was Daniela Gallardo, who is a creative artist from Lom Sapakuta, a community of Punta Arenas, Chile. Their art is basketry and that is part of their own identity as a community. Sometimes we think that all those artforms, such as making a basket, don't have any type of creativity or intellectual baggage. What I have realized when I see the work of these artists is that behind a community, there is a collective identity and a resistance to colonization. This is a type of art that has endured for centuries and now is a Chilean heritage.

Daniela Galán: Teresa mentioned earlier that redefining what art is has financial consequences not only for obtaining funds for production, but also in relation to the economic value that is given to certain works. For example, a handcraft work might never be worth what Damien Hirst's work is worth.





Screening by Colectiva Lemow.



Trenzar Perú during the National Day to Combat LGBTIQ Violence and Hate Crimes

Julia Cabrera: I wonder why. For example, a man like Jeff Koons, who makes sculptural pieces out of balloons, is a highly valued artist, but a woman who spends decades to finish her work, something handcrafted, does not have visibility. Many times the name of these artists never comes out. And exhibition of handcraft includes the individual makers under a broad label, instead of putting the names and surnames of all the artists.

Daniela Galán: This makes me think about the work that Trenzar does, in relation to the reconceptualization that they are doing from the performing arts. What transformations in terms of narrative are you proposing?

Alondra Flores: Everything that Yanira and Julia said resonates with us. First, because we are women creating from the testimony of women. We are women removing the image of muse, ceasing to be muses; we are women who recognize ourselves as poets, as directors, as producers and as managers. I think this bold attitude has taken away the possibility of receiving financing from the State. We have not received any funding even when we have applied. This neglect has to do with the fact that not only are we a feminist collective, we also work on memory issues. At our beginning, many art spaces or theatres that worked with themes of memory or international armed conflict used victims' stories, never those of their relatives. We thought, why not invite them? Why not interview them? Why not listen to them? For us, all our artistic processes around memory happen with all of them-relatives, victims, survivors. We accompany them on their actions, their judicial processes. We must be with them and they must feel that we are their allies because if not, we will repeatedly commit the same mistake of appropriating those ideas and telling those stories from our privilege, like scenic artists. What we want precisely is to break with that. Another thing that seems important is not to place symbols for the sake of placing them, not to use and appropriate things that are not ours.

We have a link here to a video we made about political memory when the pandemic started: "Los Derechos Humanos no están en curaentena" [Human Rights are not in quarantine]. It was a call to an action of collective memory across Latin America, especially through communication and art. Fujimori's daughter was campaigning that year, so we joined forces with various collectives not only in Peru but in Latin America, and we launched a campaign called "La memoria no está en cuarentena" [Memory Is Not in Quarantine] and called on family members to appear in the video. This idea was then used in Argentina, Colombia, and other countries. And then we made the video "Los Derechos Humanos no están en cuarentena" [Human Rights Are Not in quarantine]. [Watch: https://fb.watch/diwCOno52

Alondra Flores: We did a virtual performance, an adaption from our street performance. We promoted it beforehand and people joined in, publishing their photos wearing a mask with the phrase "memory is not in quarantine". This video summarizes all those times when people got involved, and uploaded their photos. Thirteen countries came together. For us, it was quite important to feel that there were so many people that wanted to continue the fight beyond the pandemic.

I would like to show you another short video that is precisely about the call we do when we do virtual performances. This is about a case in which adolescent women were raped by soldiers at the time of the armed conflict. In our country there are many women who have given testimony about this, and since 2015 we have accompanied the legal case and made interventions, such as a play with their

testimonies. Last year we went virtual.

[Watch: https://fb.watch/diXt0SR1ro/]



Manta and Vilca case. Click on image to see large poster. #QueLaVerdadSeSepa #JusticiaparaManta)

Alondra Flores: In it you can see close ups of many women screaming. Yellow and black colors recur because the case had those colors. In the photo below you can see how diverse the women are who joined the campaign. They uploaded their photos with the hashtag "let the truth be known" and offered some information about the Manta and Vilca case. This is how we create our actions.

Daniela Galán: I also want to ask the Lemow collective: have you experienced some practices of censorship or being rendered invisibile by the State? You previously mentioned, Yanira, that in Guatemala the discourse was very much controlled by outsiders, but does the State impose restrictions or policies of censorship?

Yanira Ixmucané: I don't know if it's censorship, but there is a lot of fraudulence. In 2017 we were going to develop a project in conjunction with the State, but eventually the State failed to fulfill many obligations. We worked on it for almost three years. Many times when the State sees the way you work, it wants to join your projects but not in the right way. The truth is that working with any government is complicated, especially when we lack legal training, and that often has a psychological effect on us. They reduce your desire to do things, so you wonder, how can you fight against such a great power?

Daniela Galán: Practices of violence are also manifest in the State and in institutions. Also for Julia from Afroféminas, how are your relations with institutions such as festivals, film schools, or industrial spaces?

Julia Cabrera: We have to be very careful because in Spain some institutions and associations, in a very normalized way, use diversity as a marketing tool. You have to be very careful because the institutions play with publicizing diversity. A museum or gallery may reference artist like Abya Yala in order to say, "Look, we are no longer racist. We already have diversity." Afroféminas must be careful about this. In our case, we have gone from having nothing to getting many calls, many institutions wanting to continue our work. It's most important that we know their purpose for working with our art and our identity.

Daniela Galán: As Cristina and Alondra mentioned previously, it is important to give voice to the people who are speaking their own discourse, not simply speaking for them. This leads me to another question: Where can we see the productions that all of you are developing? How can the public have access to each of your works? In your case, Cristina from Trenzar, you have an active presence on social media, but I don't know if you also have other platforms where your projects can be seen.

Cristina Renteros: Absolutely, we are on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, but also, we are managing specific virtual projects, on zoom.

- https://www.instagram.com/trenzar_asociacioncultural/?hl=en
- https://www.facebook.com/TrenzarPeru
- https://www.youtube.com/c/ColectivaTrenzar

Teresa Jiménez: Our projects are hosted on <u>YouTube</u> which is our main channel, but the promotion and everything is through our social media like Facebook and Instagram. Likewise, if you go to the web, there are links to our social media accounts.

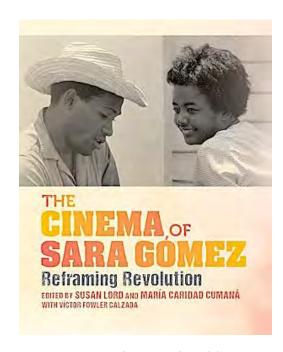
Daniela Galán: Thank you very much for your magnificent work and I agree that these projects are extremely important and deserve to be known.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Book cover of *The Cinema of Sara Gómez:* Reframing Revolution Susan Lord and María Caridad Cumaná, with Víctor Fowler Calzada. The volume reunites what Cumaná has called a "concert of dissimilar voices" (vii) through twenty distinct interventions, including interviews with and writings by Gómez. Courtesy of Indiana University Press.

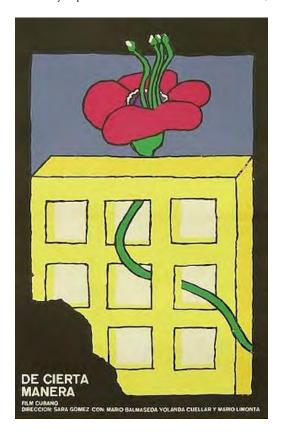
Where intimacy displaces violence: The Cinema of Sara Gómez

review by Leticia Berrizbeitia Añez

Susan Lord and María Caridad Cumaná, with Víctor Fowler Calzada, eds. *The Cinema of Sara Gómez: Reframing Revolution*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. 427 pp. \$95 hardcover, \$40 paperback, \$39.99 e-book.

Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha's famous motto "a camera in hand and an idea in mind" has become a trope to account for 1960s cinema's poetics and politics, an era of social movements, militancy, hope, and international solidarity. The manifestos of Imperfect Cinema, Aesthetics of Hunger, and Third Cinema include some of the ideas that shaped cinematic revolution in Latin America.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Yet, what appears more subversive from today's standpoint is finding an Afro-Caribbean woman as a protagonist of that history as the one pointing the camera and thinking critically through her images. The single most well-known Cuban woman filmmaker, Sara Gómez, was an active and prolific director from the early sixties through the early seventies who conjured a powerful symbol of diversity in cinema. As a symbolic charge, her contribution is as strong today as it was then, given the ongoing exclusion of black women filmmakers. The texts collected in The Cinema of Sara Gómez: Reframing Revolution, edited by Susan Lord and María Caridad Cumaná with Víctor Fowler Calzada carefully situate the figure and impact of Gómez's cinema, with a focus on the intersection between gender and race within the context of the Cuban revolution. They deliver a rich portrayal of the filmmaker's life and work through a collective retelling of her story.

A project long in the making, *The Cinema of Sara Gómez: Reframing Revolution*, reunites what Cumaná has called a "concert of dissimilar voices" (vii) through twenty distinct interventions. This "concert" includes interviews with and writings by Gómez, most of them translated to English for the first time, and meticulous critical and theoretical approaches to her work written by Cuban and international researchers. The book also makes available an otherwise hard-to-find comprehensive filmography of the more than twenty titles covering Gómez's different roles in each production. The filmography starts from the moment she arrived at the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria CinematográficOs (ICAIC, or Cuban Film Institute) in 1961 and finishes with the release of *De cierta manera* (*One Way or Another*) in 1977—edited posthumously by her colleagues.



Poster of *De cierta manera* (*One Way or Another*, 1977), Gómez's only feature and best-known piece. ©ICAIC.



Gómez during the production of *De cierta* manera (One Way or Another, 1977) at the Havana area of Las Yaguas, whose inhabitants were resettled to the neighborhood Residencial Miraflores. ©ICAIC.



The filmmaker, Sara Gómez, in a still shot from her 33-minute documentary *Mi aporte* (*My Contribution*, 1972). She participates as a character discussing women's labor and revolutionary roles. ©ICAIC.



A conversation between Cuban women workers about their challenges in *Mi aporte* (*My Contribution*, 1972). Upon completion, the film was censored by the *Federación* de *Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC, or Federation of Cuban Women). ©ICAIC.

But beyond this film, her only feature and best-known piece, the book gives prominence to the often neglected nineteen films that comprise Gómez's documentary filmography. Most of the authors engage in close readings or different degrees of analysis of many documentary films, emphasizing *Mi aporte* (*My Contribution*, 1972), which was censored by the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC, or Federation of Cuban Women) upon completion. In over ten years of archival research, travel, and networking, Lord and Cumaná created the alliances that permitted locating the materials and films, honing the arguments, and making some of the existing scholarship on Gómez in Spanish accessible to English speakers. The editors' mission in this volume goes from anthologizing the writings on Sara Gómez to re-historizing her.

Weighing Gómez's legacy and impact attending to her complex position in the tumultuous era of early post-1959 Cuban cinema required both resignifying and expanding available sources to study her. Therefore, *The Cinema of Sara Gómez* spotlights several research findings. These include an undated script of *De cierta manera* under the title *Residential Miraflores*, as it was labelled in the Documentation Center of the ICAIC, and unpublished until now. The anthology also brings back Gómez's own words, in the form of an illustrated essay—titled *Rumba* and written for magazine *Cuba* in 1964, and two translated interviews. In the first interview which is included in the book's initial chapter, she responds to a prompt from the publication *Pensamiento Crítico* about "documentary filmmakers and their convictions" in 1970. The second one is a conversation between Gómez and French writer and filmmaker Marguerite Duras.

Finally, the volume includes interviews with some of Gómez's close friends and colleagues: intellectual and activist Inés María Martiatu Terry, and crew members, including filmmakers Sergio Giral and Rigoberto López, cinematographer Luís García Mesa, and editor and artist Iván Arocha Montes de



The introductory sequence of *De cierta manera* (*One Way or Another*, 1977) shows Las Yaguas being demolished. In his essay, Fowler Calzada contextualizes the 1960's governmental efforts against urban poverty in a more extensive history of labor and slavery in Cuba. ©ICAIC.



The essays by Devyn Spence Benson and Lourdes Martínez Echazábal demonstrate how black Cuban women are at the heart of Gómez cinema, like Maria in this scene of *En la otra Isla* (On the Other Island, 1968). ©ICAIC



Spence Benson finds in Gómez's work a continuation of scarcely historicized public debates about racial discrimination of the first decade of the revolution. For instance in her interviews of the film *En la otra isla* (*On the Other Island*, 1968) with Maria, who works in the farm

Oca. These transcribed interviews reconstruct an intimate portrait of the filmmaker's experiences, beliefs, and interactions through oral history. The findings speak volumes on the value of revisiting archives, reuniting oral histories, and pursuing the inquiry beyond strictly cinematic sources to make film histories more inclusive. The role of translation in the project is noteworthy considering that twelve out of the twenty texts reunited were originally written in Spanish.

The edited volume's collaborative nature is acutely political, and the ordering of the writings responds to this ethos before any chronological or argumentative structure. Lord defines the collection in her introduction as a "living archive" (2) and a "community conversation" (19), woven by threads other than logical progression. The conversation begins with Odette Casamayor-Cisneros's survey of Gómez's films. It contextualizes them within and against dominant ideas of the decade she filmed in while tracing the filmmaker's perspectives on the revolutionary process' blindspots on "social marginality." Fowler Calzada furthers these reflections on the Cuban revolution's challenge to "incorporate the dispossessed into full citizenship" (89). In his essay, he contextualizes the 1960's governmental efforts against urban poverty in more extensive histories of labor and slavery in Cuba. This way, he inscribes De cierta manera in an intellectual current of Cuban abolitionist thought. Moreover, Fowler Calzada offers a comparison between the feature film as we know it today, finalized by Gómez's collaborators after her death in 1977, and the printed script that this volume makes available for the first time.

The writings of Devyn Spence Benson and Lourdes Martínez Echazábal address the "dispossessed" in more concrete racialized and gendered terms. They demonstrate that black Cuban women are at the heart of Gómez's cinema. Spence Benson studies Gómez's work as part of the Afro-Cuban political activism of the period that responded to "the government's 1960 declaration that racial discrimination had been eliminated" (226). He finds in her documentary films *Iré a Santiago (I'm going to Santiago*, 1964), *Guanabacoa: Crónicas de mi familia* (Guanabacoa: *Chronicles of my Family*, 1966), and *En la otra isla (On the Other Island*, 1968) a continuation of scarcely historicized public debates about racial discrimination of the first decade of the revolution. Gómez's films produced a creative space of resistance in a context of "repeated state attempts to silence public conversations about lingering racism in favor of national unity" (225).

Also paying attention to the traditions and locations of the African diaspora in the Caribbean, Martínez Echazábal dedicates her essay exclusively to a close reading of the film *Iré a Santiago* (*I'm going to Santiago*, 1964), in dialogue with Federico García Lorca's homonym poem that the visual essay homages and demystifies through a filmic parody. In a different register, but also paying attention to the histories of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, Alan West-Durán assesses Gómez's unsubordinated use of music in her films. He reflects on the Cuban use of "sabor" (literally, flavor) alluding to Gómez's documentary *Y tenemos... sabor* (*And we've got... Flavor*, 1967) to compare the term with Barthes definition of photographic *punctum* as "a moment in time, but it has a ripple effect that never ceases" (338). In his view, Gómez knew how to create this effect in her films, which positions her love and knowledge of Cuban rhythms as a key to understanding her work.

and trains as hairdresser in the youth island, and Rafael, agriculture worker and opera singer.

©ICAIC.



Credits titles from *Iré a Santiago (I'm going to Santiago,* 1964), an homage and parody of Federico García Lorca's homonym poem. ©ICAIC



Martínez Echazábal dedicates her essay exclusively to a close reading of the film *Iré a Santiago (I'm going to Santiago,* 1964), as a document of the traditions and locations of the African diaspora in the Caribbean. In the still frame a *santiaguera*, a woman from Santiago de Cuba. ©ICAIC.



The percussion instrument *clave* opens the film *Y tenemos... sabor* (*And we've got... Flavor*, 1967). Alan West-Durán positions Gómez's love and knowledge of Cuban rhythms as a key to

The critical approaches of Ana Serra and Sandra Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez pay particular attention to the gendering of the subjects in Gómez's films. Serra contrasts the image and patriarchal underpinnings of the "New Man," developed by Ernesto Guevara in his influential text *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, to Gómez's documentary interviewees. She emphasizes Gómez's talent to explore the ambivalence and contradictions between revolutionary ideals and real people. For Serra, Gómez's documentaries prove that Cubans remained critical of the gap between official discourses of identity and their daily challenges. By attesting the distance between her characters and the "New Man," Serra makes clear to what extent this ideal appears as race and gender blind, apart from inhuman. Serra asserts:

"As the enthusiasm of the 1960s waned and Guevara became the hallmark of a nostalgic ethical ideal, he became the only New Man ever seen" (302).

Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez looks closely at *Mi aporte* as a film that shows to what extent the revolution had not been able to find solutions to women's marginalization. She describes how the film focuses on care work and motherhood as the main obstacles for women participating in volunteer work and paid labor, challenges to which employers and legal frameworks were blind. This analysis spotlights Gómez's feminist cinema contribution through this inconvenient picture of the revolution that was the reason behind the FMC censoring.

The more theoretical approaches by Joshua Malitsky, Cumaná, and Lord situate the study of the cinema of Gómez against the histories of documentary and ethnographic cinema, Cuban cinema, and feminist film theory and practices respectively. Malitsky delves into the earliest works of Gómez when she had just entered ICAIC at 18 years old and was working on the Enciclopedia Popular (Popular Encyclopedia) series. He argues that she already displayed an inclination for "special" topics and experimental forms. The author contextualizes these documentaries in the Cuban educational initiatives and literacy campaigns that pursued the openly ideological project of creating active and aware media consumers. Cumaná brings about a timely auteurist comparison between the cinemas of Gómez and Nicolás Guillén Landrián, the two black filmmakers in those years at ICAIC, to discuss how their films were the ones centering black identities, practices and customs as well as the most radical visual experiments within the group, although in very different ways. For Cumaná, what distinguishes Gómez's cinema is her participatory techniques, which rely heavily on ethnographic style and methods that provoked her interviewees to relay some of "Cuban's cinema most impactful testimonies of racial discrimination" (257). In contrast, Guillén Landrián remained more a subtle observant behind the camera.

Lord is responsible for framing the book's discussions and conversations through an introduction and concluding essay. In her introduction, she provides a genealogy of the scant public attention to Gómez documentaries that, in high contrast to the considerable attention on *De cierta manera*, has few exceptions inside and outside Cuba. She describes this phenomenon of visibility/invisibility of Gómez filmography through the metaphor of a tide that flows and ebbs, a helpful trope as it also illuminates the fate of other women filmmakers. Gómez's legacy ebbs from the legendary status of a symbolically saturated image to the generations of contemporary filmmakers that have not been able to experience her documentaries. How can we explain that a renowned filmmaker has a mostly unknown filmography? What are the reasons behind that apparent paradox? Is it due to the formats of her films, archival accessibility, censorship, the blockade of an island and consequent isolation of its institutions? Or is it because of Gómez's race, gender, age? Following Lord, no factor alone can explain the ebbing of her

understanding her work. He compares Barthes definition of photographic *punctum* with the Cuban use of the word "sabor," (literally, flavor) to explain the effect she creates in her films through music. ©ICAIC.



Generations superimpose in the documentary *Guanabacoa: Crónicas de mi familia* (*Guanabacoa: Chronicles of my Family*, 1966), where Gómez discusses black Cuban memory and legacy through her family's history. ©ICAIC



According to Lord, Gómez produces an intimate involvement with the others she represents in her ethnographic and autoethnographic experiments. We see her above interviewing madrina or godmother, the character around whom the film *Guanabacoa: Crónicas de mi familia* (Guanabacoa: Chronicles of my Family, 1966) and Sara's family revolves. ©ICAIC.



legacy, but instead their complex intersection: a black revolutionary woman who refused to conform to the dominant patriarchal, national, and racist traditions that conflicted with her awareness and commitments. In the words of Lord:

"From her biography through to the structures of her documentary films, we find in Gómez a filmmaker who continuously reevaluated the promises of modernity and the Cuban Revolution, and the values inherited through popular memories of families, streets, and altars. She did not settle on a positive, unequivocally affirmative image (10)."

In the concluding essay, Lord relies on a line of feminist documentary theory inquiry where the interventions of Linda Williams, Julia Lesage, and Julianne Burton-Carvajal stand out. In a candid gesture that also participates in the feminist tradition of revealing the writer's standpoint, she discusses the challenges of doing this work across distances of geography and socio-economic realities that separate her from the worlds where Gómez's works circulate (373). Lord situates her analysis on Gómez's documentaries *En la otra isla* and *Mi aporte*. The author asserts that in her ethnographic and autoethnographic experiments, Gómez produces an intimate involvement with the others she represents. Instead of detached, an involved dynamic relationship "authorizes her to speak of and to the Other" (383). Instead of a "camera weapon," another trope of the period, Gómez's camera becomes a "mirror of affection" for Lord (12), one where intimacy displaces violence.

Essays and interviews coincide in the image of Gómez as someone who did not settle and overtly expressed her critical perspective, while the anecdotes spread through the volume conjures her appearance in the pages. The book then becomes a "biographical palimpsest of Gómez herself" (10) made out of her remaining words as much as the perspectives of the mentioned academics, journalists, and filmmakers. Even the stories that reappear and the arguments that overlap gain a layered emphasis. For example, the testimonies of Gómez's burial, a tale retold in several interviews and essays, coincide in describing the feeling of a mystical presence in the form of sudden rain. Between these testimonies, the inclusion of Gómez's writings in the book's beginning, middle, and ending, and her voice that sparks through film's descriptions and loved one's memories, this collection of texts gets at moments the flavor of a séance. Gómez is being recalled, if not by the mystical beliefs of her family, friends, and colleagues, by the deep impression her short and intensely-lived life and prolific filmography left on the book's contributors. According to Lord, this recalling aims to push Gómez's significance forward in time.

It is fortunate that the longstanding critical and scholarly attention to Gómez in the Anglo-speaking field of film studies finally found its way into a book. It is one that is also collaborative and aware of its role in leveraging the resources to make the Spanish-speaking knowledge production accessible. In line with Lord's promise by the end of the conclusion, that she finishes with the phrase "no es el fin" (it is not the end, 389), I would love to see a second volume detailing the archival research practices that made the publication possible, or even a translated edition of the book in order to make available the interviews and scripts in their original language. But more importantly, *The Cinema of Sara Gómez*'s reflections and documentation open new avenues for continuing the inquiry. Therefore, it is a must-read for those researching and teaching feminist documentaries, decolonial ethnography, and the histories of Latin American Cinema.

Malitsky delves into the earliest works of Gómez when she entered ICAIC at 18 years old and was working on the *Enciclopedia Popular* (Popular Encyclopedia) series. He argues that she was already inclined to "special" topics and experimental forms. ©ICAIC.





Gómez interviews Rafael, an aspiring opera singer in *En la otra isla (On the other Island*, 1968).

Instead of a camera weapon, another trope of the 1960s cinema, Lord understands Sara Gómez's camera as a "mirror of affection" (12), an image where intimacy displaces violence. ©ICAIC.

Notes

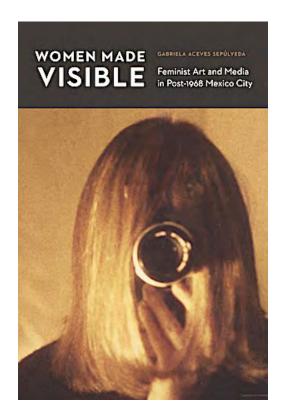
1. Images are taken from *The Cinema of Sara Gómez: Reframing Revolution* edited by Susan Lord and María Caridad Cumaná, with Víctor Fowler Calzada. Courtesy of Indiana University Press and copyright Instituto Cubano De Arte E Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC). [return to text]

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Cover of Women Made Visible. Feminist Art and Media in Post-1968 Mexico City by Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

Visualities and the City: feminizing public spaces through art and media in post 1968 Mexico City

review by Márgara Millán

Women Made Visible. Feminist Art and Media in Post-1968 Mexico City by Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019). 381 pp. \$65 hardcover, \$35 paperback and e-book.

In memory of Sarah Minter

In this book, Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda offers us invaluable material to understand the development of *feminist space* in Mexico City. Establishing a genealogy of the 1970s movements and describing their practices, the author shows how the regimes of media and visuality have been transformed by these interventions.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Aceves Sepúlveda proposes the concept of *visual letrada*, adopting Ángel Rama's term in his influential book *Ciudad Letrada*, which refers above all to influential men in urban culture through their writing, and the City as the center of cultural hegemony. By using the same metaphor, Aceves Sepúlveda proposes to understand women's agency in a historical context, as a factor capable of changing the male hegemonic cultural perspective. Mexico City is seen here as a cultural space—an organizer of meanings that radiate gender hegemony.





El tendedero. © 1978 by Mónica Mayer. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The 1970s is a special decade in Mexican feminist historiography. Mexico became a site of "gender visibility" as the UN World Conference on Women took place there in 1975. Hundreds of women gathered in this official event. Many others organized a counter-conference, a non-institutional effort to criticize the way Mexican government was promoting feminism. We can think of these two events as big political events, but what Aceves Sepúlveda researches in this book is the other face and form of politics: how, by daily interventions in the media and the public space, "women [were] made visible."

The author focuses on four women who, through their work in the arts and media, question established structures of power and knowledge, representational images and traditional concepts, by also opening up different forms of "political subjectivity." These women are: visual artist Ana Victoria Jiménez, filmmaker Rosa Martha Fernández, visual artist Mónica Mayer, and videoartist Pola Weiss.



Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres y Movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer, Colectivo La Revuelta performing La opresión de la mujer (detail of the military, the woman and the priest). Photo © 1976 by Ana Victoria Jiménez. Archivo Ana Victoria Jiménez, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México.

Aceves Sepúlveda's book appeals to women's action in various media and social spheres. She refers to three important shifts in the Mexican cultural and media scene in the second half of the 20th century: the first is a shift from the centrality of literate-print culture towards audiovisual culture; the second refers to the increasing participation of women in the public sphere; and the third is the reemergence of the feminist movement.

The author focuses on how the practices of the *visual letrada* intervene in this cultural shift from the literate culture (la ciudad letrada) to the media, especially in television, video, and cinema; and on how these interventions increase the visibility of women and their capacity for self-representation. In doing so, Aceves Sepúlveda also problematizes and expands on the notion of the archive. She defines how she adheres to the archival turn as follows:

"the interest here is not to recover women's voices but rather to make visible how they increasingly became agents of the archive" (p. 22).

Aceves Sepúlveda is also an active agent of the archive, while proposing these four women and their art are an important part of it. For her the archive is a category, a concept, a practice, a medium, and a collection of varied objects. Above all, the archive determines the parameters of the historical narrative. In order to transform these parameters, the author presents materials that must be taken in account so that a shift in the archive can be possible. This shift broadens the gaze and makes visible the impact of this particular junction of Mexican feminism and the incidence of these four women in it.

The book relies on personal interviews, recollection, recreation of practices as performances, and personal archives of the four women already mentioned above: Ana Victoria Jiménez, Rosa Martha Fernández, Mónica Mayer and Pola Weiss. Through this material, Aceves Sepúlveda proposes to complete the political and cultural archive of the 1970s in Mexico City in a broad cultural way as well as to inscribe these practices into a wider feminist archive. Her project also shows the patriarchal politics of the archive, which requires feminist research to go against the grain. In this way, Aceves Sepúlveda builds a new archive that allows us to better understand the genealogy of feminism in Mexico and its intervention into the visibility of women, feminizing the public sphere, which also made possible the contemporary practices of feminism(s) in Mexico city.

The book is comprised of three main sections: "Feminizing the City," "The Archival Practices of a Visual Letrada," and "Protesting the Archive." I will indicate some of the main topics dealt with in each of these sections, emphasizing the great amount of information that Aceves Sepúlveda gathers to consider the social, political and cultural context of the corpus she analyzes. For example, in the first section, the author deals in three chapters—"The Official City," "The Media City" and "The Embodied City"— with the shifts in material culture, from





Madre por un día (Mother for a Day). © 1987 by Polvo de Gallina Negra. Video stills courtesy of Mónica Mayer.



Masked woman with man in sunglasses, La Revuelta performing outside Mexico City's

the "official" male and literate dominance, to the media, and to the embodied city as an effect of feminist interventions. Women were highly visible but as part of the dominant narrative of "the woman," as clearly exemplified by the protagonists of Mexican soap operas. In another example, in the popular newscasts of the period under analysis there was a news anchor, Lolita Ayala, who similarly embodied the conservative vision of womanhood.

In this context, the author documents a feminist intervention which took place in another news program called Nuestro Mundo, hosted by Guillermo Ochoa, also very influential and with a large number of viewers. In this morning show broadcasted by Televisa, the largest and most powerful media corporation in the country, Ochoa performed a script proposed by two feminists who were also participating in the program, Mónica Mayer and Marisa Bustamante, from the feminist collective Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Chicken Powder). Their performance, called "Mother for a day," critically and humorously describes the first "male/mother," as Aceves Sepúlveda refers to a pregnant male. Pregnancy comes after a magic act performed by the two artists, and a prothesis is used to present a pregnant male body. This parody of traditional motherhood caused a national stir. Aceves Sepúlveda describes this feminist intervention in great detail, thus contributing to the feminist expansion of the archive mentioned above. At the time, Mayer and Bustamante framed Ochoa's transformation into "Mother for a day" as a work of art, embracing their choice to perform on television saying that "today television is the museum of modern art." For Aceves Sepúlveda this is a strategy of feminizing the city by hacking the mainstream media, which are the main builders of the sexist and heteronormative gaze.

In the second section of the book, "The Archival Practices of a Visual Letrada," the author focuses on the archive of Ana Victoria Jiménez. She introduces the artist's photographic work while contextualizing the development of the first broad feminists organizations of that time.

Post 68 in Mexico was not a very peaceful time. While researching Echeverría's six-year term (post 1968) in the General Archive of the Nation, the author found a series of reports of agents who, during the 1970s, carried out espionage on feminist marches in Mexico City. The national security files were made publicly available shortly before Aceves Sepúlveda conducted her investigation. Thus, while analyzing the personal collection of Ana Victoria Jiménez, the author discovered a parallel archive which accounts for the existence of this artist from the perspective of the State. The random and surprising discovery allowed the author to bring together two absolutely opposed point of view. Reading the agents' reports in parallel to the photographs of Ana Victoria Jiménez allows the author to reconstruct different aspects of the cultural practices and the legacies of the feminist movement. Jiménez's own archive also includes public reactions to the performances of these feminist collectives, and in one particular photo, it even features a supposed agent who is surveilling one of these many performances. As Aceves Sepúlveda states:

"Through a reading of these two archives, the visual letrada emerges not solely defined by the visual nature of its sources—like Jimenez's photographs. Rather, the visual letrada develops through a willingness to contest and return the gaze through images, ephemera, Street performances, archival practices, and embodied encounters as seen through the interplay of looks between publics and performers" (p.

National Auditorium, CMF. Photo© 1978 by Ana Victoria Jiménez. Archivo Ana Victoria Jiménez, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México.



Nuestra señora de las iguanas (Our Lady of the Iguanas), Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico. Photo © 1979 by Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of the artist.

165).

Finally, in the third section of the book, "Protesting the Archive," Aceves Sepúlveda presents an interesting way to think about the archive. In the subsection entitled "Interrupting Photographic Traditions," the author brings into play the iconic photographic work of Tina Modotti, Graciela Iturbide, Lola Álvarez Bravo and Mariana Yampolsky. These are great photographers who entered the international art circuit largely thanks to their portraits of "indigenous" women, especially from Oaxaca, who were often depicted in their "otherness," according to the author. Aceves Sepúlveda productively opposes their work and its cultural nationalist feature to the photographic work of Ana Victoria Jiménez. By focusing on one of her photographs, in which she portrays a group dance by the Coalition of Feminist Women, the author demonstrates that both visual archives can only be understood if we read them together. Looking at them this way makes visible how one archive interrupts the other, helping us to identify the politics of representation within a visual economy.



Coalición de Mujeres Feministas and Red Nacional de Mujeres at los Talleres Coayoacán (Coalition of Feminist Women and National Network of Women at the Coyoacán Workshops), Mexico City. © 1982 by Ana Victoria Jiménez. Archivo Ana Victoria Jiménez, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México.

Also in this section we find the final chapter, "*POLArizing* the Archive," Aceves Sepúlveda shows how the world of the image was expanded through intervention by women, by analyzing the amazing work of Pola Weiss. Video-artist Pola Weiss began using video in Mexico to propose an alternative television: *From the idiot box to the magic box* was her motto. Professor at the National Autonomous University of México, UNAM, she taught video production and supported the possibility of video-theses. Pola Weiss was a pioneer in many ways: a video artist and video dancer, she used the resources she had at hand to make experimental work.

Her prolific work is analyzed by Aceves Sepúlveda in the section she calls "*POLArizing* the Archive." Without any doubt, Pola Weiss's work expands the archive of the *feminization of the city*, of the gaze. Above all, she positions the body-camera relation in a pioneering way, long before video became a manageable technology for bodily closeness and the rhythm of the heartbeat. Pola Weiss's videos are made with no other resources than her passion and creativity. In the video *Mi ojo es mi corazón* (My eye is my heart, 1986), Weiss describes in



David. © 1983 by Pola Weiss. Catalogación Edna Torres-Ramos, Centro de Documentación ARKHEIA, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM.



two shots a city broken by the 1985 earthquake and a broken heart after an abortion.

Pola Weiss's work is very important, due to its polyphony: criticism of class structures, putting the body literally in the center of visual representation, questioning racism, appropriating a medium such as television, to turn it around and launch it as a space for creativity and ludic performance. All this had an impact on subsequent video makers, such as Sarah Minter's essential work in the 1980s and 1990s.

At the same time, the first generations of students graduating from film schools were emerging. The Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica and the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos had been founded in the mid-1960s. The first women directors, screenwriters, and editors appeared. Marcela Fernández Violante was a graduate of the first generation of CUEC, in 1969, and directed this school from 1984 to 1988. The group Colectivo Cine-Mujer was formed in 1975, the first avowedly feminist collective of the time. Cine-Mujer's project was not only to denounce female stereotypes, the objectification of women and violence against them, but also to make films with an all-female crew. Their cinema was close to the so-called "new" Mexican cinema, releasing independent and experimental productions. It was a politicized wave, which recovered the legacy of the 1968 Mexican movement, emphasizing feminist criticism. Aceves Sepúlveda devotes part of her book to analyzing the impact of films such as *Cosas* de mujeres (1975-78) and Rompiendo el silencio (1979), both directed by Rosa Martha Fernández. For the author, these two films map out the ways in which gender and sexual violence against women are deeply embedded in and in a dialogic relation to the production of urban spaces.

"The creative connections these women produced through filmmaking not only questioned boundaries and genres but provided an alternative model of production premised upon the importance of developing and keeping visual records of their political practices" (pp. 234-235).

Thus, what Aceves Sepúlveda observes is how these productions: films, archives, performances, videos, television appearances, but also fanzines, interventions in monuments, photographs, are indicators of how feminism was and continues to politicize the body of women in urban spaces, while transforming media and visuality regimes.

Videodanza a dos tiempos. © 1980 by Pola Weiss. Catalogación Edna Torres-Ramos, Centro de Documentación ARKHEIA, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM.

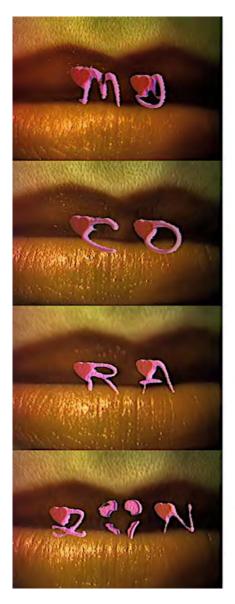




Cosas de mujeres (Women's Things). Photos ©1975-78 by Colectivo Cine-Mujer. Courtesy of Rosa Martha Fernández. Still shots of hospital scenes, left. Still shots of demonstrations, above. Abortion activism.

This book is a contribution to the history of Mexican feminism, not because these feminists and the movements in which they participated are unknown, but because Aceves Sepúlveda positions them in a different frame. Her methodology allows us to see the impact that this generation had on the democratic transition in Mexico, marking it with the feminization of public space. The sources consulted, the interviews carried out, and the archives reviewed support a book full of records of ephemeral works, which by this means are here preserved and put to work in a heuristic sense, proposing an archive in itself. Aceves Sepúlveda links institutional, technical, and political changes with women as cultural agents. Some of the assumptions may be debatable, for example, how much the images created by the great women photographers were creating "otherness" in their pictures of indigenous women or, to the contrary, making visible those women's force and presence. As a whole, *Women Made Visible* is undoubtedly innovative, referring to the *visual letradas* modifying politics and the space of politics in Mexico City, revealing the desire to give themselves to the gaze as the subtle drive

of feminism(s), which transforms the visual regime that was being imposed in that decade.

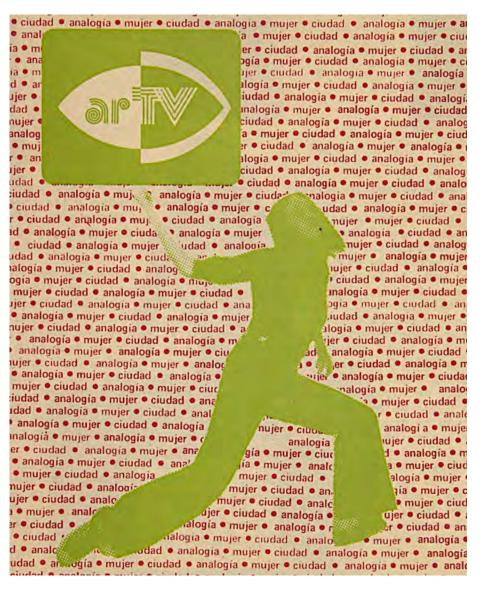




Mi ojo es mi corazón (My eye is my heart). © 1986 by Pola Weiss. Catalogación Edna Torres-Ramos, Centro de Documentación ARKHEIA, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM.

Notes

1. Images from *Women Made Visible Feminist Art and Media in Post-1968 Mexico City* by Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda. Courtesy of University of Nebraska Press. [return to text]



Salón 77-78 Bienal de Febrero Nuevas Tendencias (Exhibition 77-78 February Biennial New Trends) (back page). Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, México. © 1978 by Pola Weiss. Fondo Pola Weiss, Catalogación Edna Torres-Ramos, Centro de Documentación ARKHEIA, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



María Luisa Bemberg.



Lucrecia Martel.

Bemberg, Martel, Sarmiento: women's (counter)discourses in Southern Cone cinema

Review by Karol Valderrama-Burgos

Julia Kratje and Marcela Visconti, *El asombro y la audacia. El cine de María Luisa Bemberg*. Mar del Plata: Festival Internacional de Cine de Mar del Plata, 2020. 205 pp. Available to download here: https://mardelplatafilmfest.com/beta35/libros/elasombroylaaudacia.pdf;

Natalia Christofoletti Barrenha, *La experiencia del cine de Lucrecia Martel*. Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2020. 132 pp. \$21.98 paperback, \$8.36 eBook;

Fernando Pérez and Bruno Cuneo, eds., *Una mirada oblicua: El cine de Valeria Sarmiento*. Santiago: Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2021. n.p. \$10.99 eBook.

When I began writing this review, I asked myself whether I should follow the usual route that many of us take to complete an academic text. Not because I was planning to produce a piece outside the parameters of critical or coherent writing, but because I felt tempted and curious to create a certain rift this time. An idea got into my mind of writing a review that could be aligned with the common ground that I identified between the three books, and in line with the motivations of the three filmmakers under consideration. Thus, my aim now is to offer a useful piece to reflect on these works, demonstrating that authors with specific interests can coincide in their valuing one same core aspect: female agency and its legacy.

Julia Kratje and Marcela Visconti's anthology *El asombro y la audacia. El cine de María Luisa Bemberg* (2020), Natalia Christofoletti Barrenha's *La experiencia del cine de Lucrecia Martel* (2020), and Fernando Pérez and Bruno Cuneo's edited collection, *Una mirada oblicua: El cine de Valeria Sarmiento* (2021) share a historiographic strategy. These three volumes focus on doing what Bemberg, Martel and Sarmiento have sought in their filmmaking practice: creating a route within their texts in which viewpoints move away from the canonical register of style and pace. In other words, the three publications under review contribute to building discourses by, of, and about women, whilst fostering new, uncomfortable, or different tones, gazes and ongoing dialogue that still need to take place. If we take into consideration all the authors here, thirty-nine women and six men have a similarity in the way they study the ground-breaking work of these women filmmakers, so that each book transcends mere textual analysis of the films in question by offering perspectives on female agency—and audacity—at different levels of production and exhibition.

Women filmmakers have been present, relevant and influential in Latin America since the silent era, although recognition was mostly rare and disregarded when



Valeria Sarmiento



El mundo de la mujer/Woman's World], Bemberg's first short and overtly feminist militant film made in the Femimundo exhibition of the same year. Image taken from María Luisa Bemberg: Películas

compared with the work of men. This stems from a wider, problematic gender imbalance in the region with the historical pervasiveness of patriarchy. This burden still reveals itself in societies' persistent failure to respond to women's rights and claims, but important progress in the area of women's filmmaking has been made since the 1990s. In addition, subsequent and growing scholarly interest is making visible the women's careers, works and influence over the following decades, and this investigatory endeavour now proceeds in ever more systematic ways (Martin & Shaw, 2017; Robert-Camps, 2017; Torres San Martín, 2014). Therefore, the three books agree on expanding the academic debates and, more interestingly, they all move beyond the dominant "masculinised" format in which male voices have contributed to (re)shape memory.

The similarities I was able to trace through these thought-provoking texts can be further described in term of two major components which they share. On the one hand, the three books praise the roles and purposes of the filmmakers, despite the differences between these women's specific interests, and the places and periods of their film production. On the other hand, Bemberg, Martel and Sarmiento all placed a central role on address to the audience as part of their filmmaking activity. Spectator responses consequently become central to later understanding, questioning and dissemination of the filmmakers' projects.

In terms of how the three filmmakers develop their multiple (counter) discourses, the guiding principle within the texts seems to recognise a female voice on both sides of the camera. Interestingly, and echoing the earliest days of cinema, the three books stress how the filmmakers' work has been devoted to the *quotidien* and its complexities, clearly seen through the pioneering films of Bemberg (El mundo de la mujer, 1972) and Sarmiento (Un sueño como de colores, 1972). Accordingly, the books articulate how women directors implement their observations of the day-to-day via non-conventional means and perspectives. The texts also indicate historical contexts and aesthetic influences. In particular, these filmmakers follow and adapt to different extents the inherited Italian neo-realist aesthetics that were later embedded in the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC). That aesthetic legacy provides an intense dose of vitality or preoccupation about creating "protagonists who are out of step with history in order to expose problems and to foster debate" (Berthier, 2004, p. 102). All three texts also reiterate how the scripts let girls or young women be the focal points and strongest characters for the three filmmakers; the female coming of age story allows them to question the hegemonic conditions surrounding each film period of production, narrative or characters.

Additionally, the three books acknowledge how the conscientious and particular uses of image and sound are key tools that each filmmaker uses to build new insights, each establishing their well-known individual aesthetics that do not abide by conventional narratives or techniques, even reshaping conventions that were also distinctive of the NLAC. The books act as a single corpus that show that the filmmakers recognise and break down polarised conceptions of the world, whilst engaging in (de)constructive and diachronic conversations. Therefore, regardless of the forms of narrative style and cinematic production, the books celebrate how the careers and choices of Bemberg, Martel and Sarmiento have effected paradigm shifts for women's filmmaking and critical work within the Southern Cone. In a similar way, the books include varied interview material that provides the filmmakers with a place to commentate on their own work as well as that of others. This kind of style documents their filmmaking practice in a more fluid fashion, providing the field with less essayistic tones to in critical articles.



Sarmiento's *El Hombre cuando es hombre/A Man When He Is a Man,* 1982, is Sarmiento's most well-known documentary. Filmed in Costa Rica and funded by German television.



Martel's *La ciénaga/The Swamp* challenges conventional representations of children or the middle class in contemporary Argentina. Here, some boys are about to shoot a cow whilst they remain somehow stuck in time and the middle of a lush hill.



Zama (2017), Martel's most recent and fourth feature. An adaptation of the eponymous novel written by the Argentine Antonio di Benedetto in 1956.

When it comes to second strand, that is, the role of the audience, the three books continuously emphasise each director's attitude toward the viewer. The filmmakers invite the spectator to understand and use their *oeuvres* as a way to gain consciousness of the plurality, disruption, and potential difference of a female cinematic gaze. Seeing Valeria Sarmiento's gaze as oblique as Pérez and Cuneo's compiled essays would have it, Sarmiento encourages the audience to have a re-defined gaze as oblique as hers. Macarena García Moggia, one of the contributors of *La mirada oblicua*, explains that this gaze is one that,

"contrary to the unequivocal, centralised, phallic gaze [...] creates stories as anamorphic images, where one slightly moves away from the place that has been allocated through the screen, and where one sharpens the eye to see something else, something that certainly awakens desire." [My trans.] (2021, n.p.).

Lucrecia Martel's gaze (Christofoletti Barrehnha, 2020, p. 54) is a gaze fully conscious of the ambiguous, open-ended, and less safe territories that emerge after the viewing experience. In essence, the women cineastes promoted a gaze that resonates with the NLAC's aim of provoking a (re)action to change. The result is an alternative way to experience cinema that goes beyond the mere act of watching, and so viewership of this work lingers in people's minds and lives for a long time.

These texts are mindful of the several ways in which the readers may choose (or not) to engage with the filmmakers' work. They are written in various languages and translated across others. Overall, the books succeed in mediating distances between languages and territories. This is first evident in Christofoletti Barrenha's first Spanish-language edition of the Lusophone original version, *A experiência do cinema de Lucrecia Martel: Resíduos do tempo e sons à beira da piscina* (2014). Secondly, this can be seen through Pérez and Cuneo's edited and foundational collection on the cinema of Valeria Sarmiento, the first scholarly volume which is entirely centred on her work. Sarmiento was long in exile in Europe. This book evokes the filmmaker's reminiscences and reflections in exile, demonstrating that cinema is clearly a transnational means that women filmmakers may use to (re)build history and memory—a theme that can also be tracked in Kratje and Visconti's compilation.

As for the individual contribution of the latter—*El asombro y la audacia. El cine de María Luisa Bemberg*—this edited collection joins the extensive scholarly work on film pioneer María Luisa Bemberg but, looking closely, this is much more than another compilation of findings or projects. In the context of the 35th version of Mar del Plata International Film Festival, Kratje and Visconti pay tribute to and reassess the influential and outstanding work of María Luisa Bemberg on the 25th anniversary of her death. They do so through a diverse and thorough repertoire of women's voices. What struck me most when going through this book was noticing all the levels of sorority and female visibility. The editors acknowledge the contributors' roles and fields of knowledge at the beginning of each chapter, as well as the powerful ways in which the authors take part in shared views, complicities, critiques, and testimonies. Accordingly, the book is structured by four different strands. The first section, *Enfoques*, explores Bemberg's influences,



Sarmiento's 1975 La Femme au foyer/La dueña de casa. One of her films made whilst in exile.

aesthetics and approach, which is followed by the section *Encuentros*, offering texts about different interactions and collaborations throughout her career. *Espejos* and *Entre generaciones*, the third and fourth sections of this volume, focus on the further impact of Bemberg's work on different women's lives and careers in Argentine. This a very enjoyable piece for thinking about Bemberg's *oeuvre* and identifying her vestiges in a comprehensive, consistent and easy-going manner.

In the first five chapters included in *Enfoques*, women journalists and researchers provide a detailed chronological background both on the personal and the professional lives of Bemberg. Not only do they outline who the filmmaker was, her (in)formal experiences of feminist activism, but they critique the biopolitical production of the "modern woman" in Argentina at the time, which was actually absorbed by other cultural means within a false liberated path (Trebisacce, 2020, p. 43). These first chapters explore the context of Bemberg's strong criticism of the oppressions of the everyday in a woman's life, for example, in her fundamental work as co-founder of the *Unión Feminista Argentina* (UFA; Argentine Feminist Union). Going through a detailed and original reading of Bemberg's feminist short films and her six features—including the well-known *Camila* (1984) or *Yo la peor de todas* (1990)—these chapters contextualise her specific use of film language and her urgent need to build her own version of the world, and to depict a society in which children and women are strong and challenging, contributing to unveiling social hypocrisy (Montesoro, 2020, p. 100).





Camila (Bemberg, 1984) was the first Argentine film to be nominated to the Academy Awards. The film is based on the real-life, rebellious, and passionate story of Camila O'Gorman and Father Ladislao Gutiérrez.

The three following sections of *El asombro y la audacia* offer a fluent and varied perspective on Bemberg through the eyes and experiences of ten different collaborators. Including the renowned Argentinian producer Lita Stantic, the composer Luis María Serra, the filmmakers Alejandro Maci and Lucrecia Martel, these sections and their multiple voices point out the diverse and active legacy of Bemberg. Several short texts (the longest is a five-page piece) comprise perhaps the most thorough director's portrait available within the three books under review. The prose is clear, precise, and thoroughly elaborated. Even with the wide scholarship available or published on this filmmaker, this book is a friendly "user guide" for anyone who wants to navigate Bemberg's cinematic and feminist universe. One can easily devour it in less than a day, as it takes the reader through the celebration of her lifelong feminist and audio-visual manifesto quite smoothly.





Maria Luisa Bemberg on the set of *De eso* no se habla (We Don't Want to Talk About It) with Marcello Mastroianni.

María Luisa Bemberg and Alejandro Maci on set. © Diario Clarín Digital.

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Martel's *La ciénaga* shows adults who seem blind and indifferent to their children and reality. The opening sequence suggests their decadence with a drunken woman's fall.



La niña santa/The Holy Girl (Martel, 2004) explores the sexual awakening, curiosity and desire of two young and devout women.



Martel's *La mujer sin Cabeza/The Headless Woman* (2008) presents the multiple effects of a traffic accident in a woman's life.

In regard to the second book under review, La experiencia del cine de Lucrecia Martel, the significance of Christofoletti Barrenha's work lies on three aspects. First, such a detailed work gives access to sources that have been only available in English or Portuguese. Second, the author uses research based on a less conventional or vertical archive. The author makes use of digital media (YouTube) and different interviews with Martel in previous years. Third, by acknowledging that the many sources available in Spanish have covered thoroughly the importance of the New Argentine Cinema (NCA) in relation to Martel's career, the author examines in detail her treatment of sound, mostly through Michel Chion's exhaustive work. Consequently, Christofoletti Barrenha focuses on the haptic nature of Martel's three fiction features, taking Laura Marks's The Skin of the Film (2000) study as a point of reference. The introduction effectively presents ia a well-established theoretical framework and the first chapter focuses on four important dimensions within sound: space, silence, voice, and skin of the film. These components constitute a whole new universe and allow the spectator to experience Martel's cinema through corporeal perception (Christofoletti Barrenha, 2020, pp. 34-44). The author is very keen to remind us of the role of sound as unique in cinema, despite its apparent invisibility, which allows the audience to immerse themselves in newly created worlds.

In the other two chapters, Christofoletti Barrenha focuses on Martel's narrative, style and influences, which are explored in the last chapter through the film texts of the first decade of the 21st century: *La ciénaga* (2001), *La niña santa* (2004) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008). This final chapter confirms the way in which Martel's films prioritise different types of (female) desire and do not follow conventional ways of storytelling. According to the author, the continuous disconnection between what has been said and heard puts the audience in a privileged position to pay close attention to the polysemic nature of voice. As the author suggests both in the first and third chapters, it is through the voice (of the characters, the film or the filmmaker) that images make sense of specific cultures and states, and that sound is not merely reduceable to the words said.

With an excellent, comprehensive and thematic presentation of the bibliography, including later work that could not be considered throughout the monograph (given that the original version was finalised in 2011), the author's contribution serves as meeting point for different disciplines that invest in one same topic: the longstanding and seminal work of/on Martel from a renewed perspective. Even though I would have liked to see stills and some visual aids from the features analysed—something widely present in the other two books under review which helps guide a lay reader or someone whose visual memory prevails—I also appreciate the secondary role of these resources within this book. Consistent with Martel's cinematic sensorial experience, Christofoletti Barrenha proposes a narrative with open interpretations by opting out the use of images from key films or showing female characters. Although this book seems quite specific to the themes chosen and perhaps distant from the other two pieces of this review, it is important to highlight the emphasis given to the function of sound. This becomes an essential intersection between the three books and an interdisciplinary tool for making both audible and visible the work of women in South America beyond the limits of the continent and the Southern Cone itself.

Una mirada oblicua: El cine de Valeria Sarmiento is unquestionably an innovative text. The edited anthology gathers experts on the topic, including



Still from *El hombre cuando* es *hombre* (Sarmiento, 1982)



Linhas de Wellington/Lines of Wellington (Sarmiento, 2012). Epic war film that Sarmiento completed after her husband, the filmmaker Raúl Ruiz, passed away in 2011.

Cuneo as the Director of the Archivo Ruiz-Sarmiento (Ruiz-Sarmiento Archive, Universidad Católica de Valparaíso). Interestingly, the editors of this book are two out of six male contributors within the three books of this review. This ratifies the strong presence, diversity and willingness of the female voice to be in continuous dialogue with others (male or female), and throughout contemporary scholarly work within Latin American studies. Accordingly, this collection shows the importance of gathering voices whose discourses expand on a key aspect of the way we look at Sarmiento's *oeuvre*: shifting the frontal gaze to an oblique one. insisting on that horizonal but also diverted way of looking. This is something that has been hard to achieve over time. Given the scarce and fragmented scholarship regarding the Chilean cinema of exile, such a perspetive will inform future systematic research on the topic (Ramírez-Soto, 2021, n.p.). Indeed, this anthology is a high-quality piece for the analysis of women filmmakers' work in Chile and Latin America overall, especially due to the thorough and solid first section of the book, *Estudios*. Several essays delve into the production contexts, narrative and visual choices, and social impact over time of eight of Sarmiento's films. These examinations include the renowned films La femme au foyer (1975) or El hombre cuando es hombre (1982), and Linhas de Wellington (2012), the first feature she completed on behalf of her husband, Raúl Ruiz, after he passed away.

The nine essays presented in the first part of the book offer a thorough and consistent cross-referencing of key concepts and arguments, which are relevant to the understanding of the films made by Sarmiento (and that could be further thought about in relation to the other two books of this review). First, Michel Chion's (1993) theory of sound briefly reappears, more specifically through Héctor Oyarzún Galaz's examination. His analysis centres on the quotidien (at two levels in La Femme au foyer). On the one hand, this takes place within the domestic space of an upper-class woman, who supports the 1970s Chilean rightwing politics that she actually disregards. On the other, his analysis also explores the offscreen as a stylistic device to represent the framework for the prison regime that domesticity can be. In the other essays, the authors emphasise the narrative preferences of Sarmiento. Her use of melodramatic conventions, specific presence/absence of colour, and irony build Sarmiento's hybrid and unclassifiable narrative style that Francisca García (2021, n.p.) defines in her essay as "transfiction" (transficción). Thus, the filmmaker's oeuvre is constituted by documentaries and features, as well as key counter-discourses that she proposes both in relation to the dominant Chilean cinema of exile and to the Eurocentric feminist production of the late 20th century. This director's demanding countercinema shows the existing tensions between the objective and the subjective views of women artists in particular Latin American contexts. Although Sarmiento was detached from the "national" whilst in exile, the book reminds the readership about a filmmaker whose poetics and experimental aesthetics act as a cinematic and influential movement in Chile (and the Southern Cone), helping to establish a plurality of approaches and new ways to observe and defend the world of women.

The second half of this book, *Documentos*, offers the reader quite an opportunity to access exclusive material relevant to evaluating the filmmaker's career and films: Sarmiento's speech when being awarded an *honoris causa* degree by Universidad de Valparaíso; a dialogue held with the editors; a solid annotated filmography; and a photo album about and commented on by the filmmaker. Surprisingly, the second section is not as strong as the first. Acknowledging its exceptional value, the great efforts and chief result of comprising foundational essays on Sarmiento in *Estudios*, *Documentos* could have offered a stronger counterpart for such an important and almost unprecedented publication. Particularly, Sarmiento's narrative role through the second section poses a major



La telenovela errante/The Wandering Soap Opera started as filmed and unreleased material by Raúl Ruiz in 1990, and it was completed by Sarmiento in 2017. It tells the history of Chile from the point of view of a soap opera.



María Luisa Bemberg and Lita Stantic, one of her longtime collaborators.

concern. While Sarmiento is known for speaking laconically, it seems to me that the way her voice has been "adjusted" or inserted through a dialogue with the editors and an annotated photo album echoes one of the issues she faced in exile. That is, with a voice of her own, her presence goes nearly unnoticed. I would have wanted more space for Sarmiento's voice to come through unhindered, perhaps less dependent on the (sometimes long) formulated questions. According to Claudia Valdés Rojas (2021, n.p.), one of the contributors in this book, one could claim that this is an interesting extension of the mimetic device of female subversion that she implements to respond to the questions made, recognising she can place herself within the dominant narrative from a seemingly submissive role to eventually build a counter discourse that questions and dismantles male protagonism within their conversation. Either way, I would have liked to see more open questions and paths for Sarmiento to delve into the examination of her own choices, rather than documenting her agreement on several occasions. In line with Valdés Rojas's essay, it could have certainly had a dialectical conflict, bewildering and disharmonic, one that goes beyond the imposition of a specific reading upon the spoken/written word of her own work.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the work from Cuneo and Pérez is crucial in restating the multiplicity of the female voice through the authors' many revisions as they reiterate an inclusive project of rebuilding memory in Chile through the study of Sarmiento's work. More interestingly, following the insights of some of the authors (2021, n.p.), their collective work takes place through acknowledging a feminism that is not essentialist but open to embracing emancipation and affection through her productions, as Paz López states, and via different modes of looking at and reflecting on history, power and corporeality, as Josefina de la Maza and Fernando Pérez Villalón argue.

In sum, these three books evince that change is wanted, expressed, and represented by women, as the cases of Bemberg, Martel and Sarmiento prove stridently, and through the rigorous research gathered for the publications. In singular ways, these three texts highlight how the audience is capable of recognising that through these films,they gain awareness of the oppressive mechanisms that have ruled women. Consequently, the spectators understand how films can allow them/us to build discourses of protest or revindication. As I said, the readership is, and will be, in a privileged and well-informed position after going through such pioneering material to carrying on with questioning official or dominant discourses about/within the hegemonic culture of Latin America. Indeed, this will echo once more the filmmakers' aims; that is, (de)constructing knowledge, sharing seeds of change, and leading the way for current and future generations.

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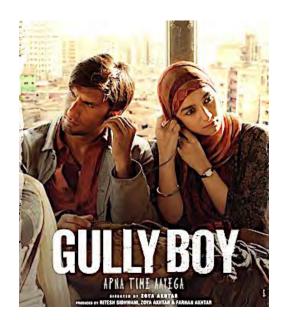
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Akhtar's *Gully Boy* was a critical and commercial success.



A major star like Amitabh Bachan (left) in an Indian film made for international streaming.

Unmaking Bollywood: style and the political in *Made in Heaven*

by Meheli Sen

"I like aesthetic. All my films are very aesthetic" —Zoya Akhtar

As I write this,[1] [open endnotes in new page] the Covid 19 pandemic has been rampaging across the globe, killing millions, and destroying economies, trade, and reordering capitalist alignments everywhere. In India, movie theaters were shuttered for over six months and have begun to reopen fitfully and with poor occupancy.[2] As the Bollywood industry stares at hundreds of millions of Rupees in losses, major filmmakers like Karan Johar and production houses like Dharma Productions, Vishesh Films, Sony Pictures, and others have had to release their films directly on VOD and OTT platforms, bypassing theatrical releases altogether.[3] The very notions of a "theatrical release" and "first-week collections", so critical to Hindi cinema's political economy have been rendered obsolete. In this moment of profound industrial precarity, the relationship between cinema and the internet has become more salient than ever, as a majority of entertainment content is today being consumed solely on the Web.

Zoya Akhtar had diversified into non-feature length work well before the current crisis hit India and Bollywood. However, I would argue that her work in the digital domain deserves special scrutiny in this moment, precisely because many of her choices—aesthetic, generic, and formal—seem prescient when read in the context of the present emergency. It is also instructive to note that when many in India were predicting a doomsday scenario for Bollywood in the wake of the "digital takeover" by OTTs such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, Akhtar has always struck an optimistic note, insisting that these platforms would create an environment of healthy competition, beneficial to all stakeholders in the business. [4] In other words, even as Akhtar's feature films such as *Gully Boy* (2019) achieved critical and box-office success, she was already looking beyond the feature film as the only viable format for creative work.

In this essay, I will argue that Akhtar's position has always been fluid and Janus-faced in this sense—a profound sense of un-belonging informs her oeuvre, even as she remains entrenched within the Bollywood network. This sense of unbelonging is not simply a matter of themes—which veer towards the subversive, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality, as I show below—but also about situating her work on sites which enable and sustain this form of expression that would make traditional film producers leery. In other words, Akhtar doesn't wholly disavow the profligate pleasures of the popular film. However, in her recent work on digital platforms, cinema often lingers as a residue, a reflexive motif already posited as an atrophied assemblage—easily recognizable, and easily evoked as a nostalgic remnant—in a decidedly postcinematic dispensation. Form,

content and the political are inextricably braided together in the industrial choices Akhtar astutely makes as a writer, director and now, producer. Ted Sarandos, the head of Netflix, had once declared in an interview that he wants to create "cinema-infused-television," defining it as "story-telling on television in episodic form, but that is shot with the big production values of the cinema..."[5] I would contend that this is precisely the potent concoction that Akhtar presents in her work on the OTT platforms.



Series made for Amazon Prime. Publicity poster for Made in Heaven.

While scholars and commentators have described the new millennium as fundamentally "post-cinematic" in the wake of the digital revolution, some stress the filmic residues that continue to haunt the emergent media ecology:

"post-cinema would mark not a caesura but a transformation that alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema. Thus, post-cinema asks us to think about new media not only in terms of novelty but in terms of an ongoing, uneven, and indeterminate historical *transition*. The postcinematic perspective challenges us to think about the affordances (and limitations) of the emerging media regime not simply in terms of radical and unprecedented change, but in terms of the ways that post-cinematic media are in conversation with and are engaged in actively re-shaping our inherited cultural forms, our established forms of subjectivity, and our embodied sensibilities." [6]

For the rest of this essay, I would like to hold on to this idea of the post-cinematic as a troubled terrain, troubled because it remains tethered to the cinema in

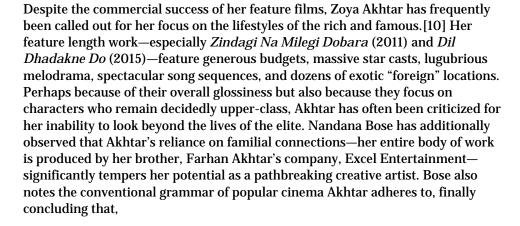
fundamental ways, but also because its emergence and consolidation remains uneven in the context I am discussing. The story of the digital in India is complicated by matters such as the uneven penetration of the Internet in nonmetropolitan areas, the cost of digital connectivity for a vast number of Indians, and the subscription costs for platforms such as Netflix, which remain prohibitive for a very large number of people. [7] Alongside the cinema, television dominates the Indian entertainment landscape, cheaply available cable TV connections now being accessed by more than 200 million households. [8] Moreover, the grammar of the traditional Hindi popular film-heady concoctions of star-driven spectacles —are almost uniquely suited to the big screen. Tent-pole films remain theatrical "events" that producers are reluctant to relinquish to OTT platforms, despite the current financial meltdown. I would contend however, that despite her deep moorings—both familial and professional—in Bollywood's industrial ecology, Zoya Akhtar has been decidedly post-cinematic for much of her career. It is fitting, therefore, to focus on her non/post film work: Made in Heaven, the web series she co-wrote, co-directed and produced for Amazon Prime Video.



Press juncket with the MIH team.

Made in Heaven featured nine episodes and released on the platform in March 2019 to largely favorable reviews and audience responses. Set against the backdrop of elite weddings in Delhi, the show remains a particularly telling instance of Akhtar's intervention in the realm of gender and sexuality, especially

as these find novel modes of articulation in the post-cinematic moment. It won several awards, including a Best Actor nomination for Arjun Mathur at the International Emmys. Much delayed by the Covid 19 pandemic, a second season has recently been announced by Amazon, attesting to the series' critical and commercial success, and indeed, fan communities online have been abuzz with speculations about the possible directions the show would take in its new season. [9] In what follows, I argue that *Made in Heaven* allows us protean points of entry into what we might consider a "post-Bollywood" media dispensation, where the basic parameters of the commercial movie industry and its generic matrices are being radically reimagined, if not rejected altogether. Zoya Akhtar remains a key figure in these new alignments.





Poster for Akhtar's "Rich People Melodrama", *Dil Dhadakne Do*.

Poster for *Bombay Talkies*, Akhtar's first foray into the anthology format.

"her [Akhtar's] marketing strategies, branding and shrewd deployment of the publicity machinery impart an illusory perception of originality and unconventionality." [11]

Film critics were even more scathing in the popular press. Mihir Fadnavis opens his review of *Dil Dhadakne Do* in this way:

"In *Dil Dhadakne Do*, a bunch of incredibly rich folks go on a foreign trip, trying to find themselves, and indulge in some thumb wrestling in the process. This could come across as corny rather than heartfelt. It certainly did in director Zoya Akhtar's last film, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, which felt like the Bollywood definition of First World Problems. Being from the third world, it was difficult to give a damn about the people in the film." [12]

Taking cognizance of these persistent allegations, Zoya retorted in an interview,

"I know people say my movies are about rich people. I don't have anything to say. What does that mean? This is not a critique, but just a reaction...You watch the film and tell me it does not work for you, I get it. But not like, this is 'a rich guy's story and does not appeal to me'. I don't wanna listen to that. It is like saying, 'I don't wanna watch this film because it's got a king, or set in a slum, neither of which I am familiar with.' It's ridiculous...At the end of the day it is about experiences, emotions that work for all of us." [13]

Whatever the legitimacy of the reviewers' pique, a consideration of Akhtar's entire oeuvre shows that far from being limited by her own class position, she has, in fact, emerged as a trenchant critic of class dynamics in South Asia.[14] Akhtar's sensitivity to issues of social inequities remains complex, not only because of the single-minded insistence on elite-lifeworlds that defined her early cinema, but also because she remains acutely aware of the segmentation of audiences in the current moment of media fragmentation. The reflexivity with which the typical consumer of the popular film appears in her work as naïve, childlike, or enchanted—for example, the child who dreams of being/becoming star Katrina Kaif in her short film for Bombay Talkies—is indicative of the ways in which her earlier work already anticipated the post-cinematic in constitutive ways. Put differently, Akhtar today aspires to a global audience for her digital content, at least, an ambition that leaves a significant section of the South Asian viewership behind. These complexities notwithstanding, I would argue that following on the heels of Gully Boy, Akhtar's keen observation of social and economic stratification remains in sharp focus in the series, Made in Heaven.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Tara and Karan pitching wedding ideas.

Undoing Bollywood, designing Made In Heaven

Made in Heaven (hereafter MIH), is an unusual series in some aspects. It was the first project to be co-produced by Akhtar's production company, Tiger Baby, and co-written by Akhtar, Reema Kagti and Alankita Shrivastava, the latter being known for directing such gritty feminist films as Lipstick Under My Burkha (2020) and Dolly Kitty Aur Who Chamakte Sitare (2020). Remarkably, while director credits are also shared by four people—Akhtar, Shrivastava, Nitya Menon and Prashant Nair—the series remains extremely cohesive in terms of thematic and stylistic preoccupations. MIH borrows the long-form narration from television, but astutely meshes length and brevity, continuity with novelty, in each of its ten episodes. In the series, MIH is the aptly named wedding planning enterprise headed by Tara (Shobita Dhulipala) and Karan (Arjun Mathur).





Title-sequence wedding showcases "the heavily aestheticized decorative image."

Kabir's didactic musings.

Thus, each episode presents the story of a new wedding they plan and execute with new characters, while the principal protagonists—the wedding planners and their friends, colleagues, and family—remain constant through the series. In this sense, each episode features a self-contained chapter nestled within the frame story that propels it forward to the next. The thematic and formal unities are also buttressed by the wedding videographer, Kabir's, codas—each episode ends with a montage of images he shoots while his voiceover commentary steers the audience to draw specific conclusions about issues raised. In this sense, MIH is both excessively obvious and arguably didactic. It joins a list of "progressive" media texts which comment on everything from caste to gender, patriarchy, and the absence of civil and sexual liberties in contemporary India. Examples of this new genre of medium budget films with "social messages" would include *Dum Lagake Haisha* (2015), *Toilet Ek Prem Katha* (2017), *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* (2017), *Badhai Ho* (2018), *Luka Chhuppi* (2019), and *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), and *Jayeshbhai Jordaar* (2022), among many others.

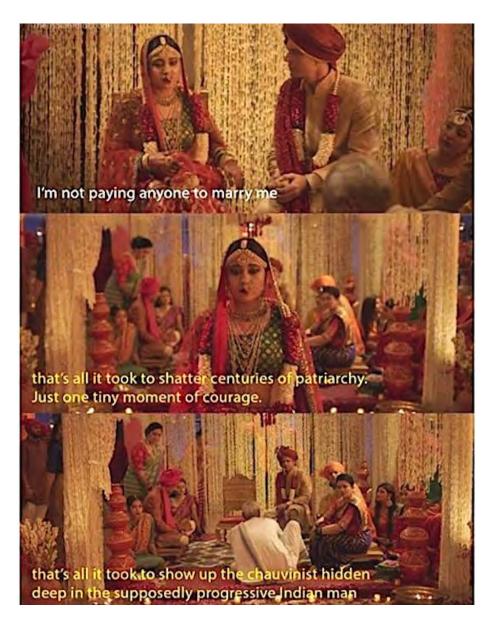




Laboring bodies desiging the wedding.

However, in certain key ways, I would suggest that MIH constellates as a distinct cluster of affects and politics. Despite its overtly progressive rhetorical stance, the political emerges in more complex ways in the series, not least because the show retains a reflexive awareness of the ironies that attend to critiques of class on an arguably elite platform such as Netflix. Beyond the "social message films" mentioned above, OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+Hotstar, etc., have emerged as the vanguards of progressivism in the South Asian media ecology; I would wager that the contradictions inherent in this schism between "message" and platform is not lost on the makers of the series.

To begin with, MIH features at least two distinct registers of images: the sumptuous spectacles of the weddings in question and the "real" lives of the protagonists who mount these lavish events, largely in Delhi and surrounding areas. It is my contention that the political in MIH, and especially the imbrication of class with gender/sexuality that scaffolds the bulk of its themes is equally elaborated at the level of the image and style more generally. The series carefully calibrates the constructed-ness of the "Bollywood wedding" tableaux with the more offhand (although rarely less composed) images of the "real" characters in the show. In other words, the excessively composed, commodity saturated wedding spectacles are carefully juxtaposed against the ostensible "realism" of the frame story. Matters, are, however, rarely this schematic in MIH, a point I will return to presently.



Priyanka's rebellion.

In her work on the heavily aestheticized "decorative image," Rosalind Galt frames the problem thusly, noting that, "The rhetoric of cinema has consistently denigrated surface decoration, finding the attractive skin of the screen to be false, shallow, feminine, or apolitical..." (Galt, 2). Rejecting this historically entrenched denigration of the pretty in Western aesthetic traditions, Galt asks:

"Can the pretty be put to critical, even political use? Further, if the pretty is usually rejected as too feminine, too effeminate, and too foreign, it can surely provide aesthetico-political friction for queer or feminist film or for cinemas engaged with but geopolitically distanced from Western aesthetic traditions. Might prettiness in cinema be uniquely able to develop a politics that engages gender, sexuality, and geographical alterity at a formal level rather than simply as a problem for representation?" (Galt, 6)

Galt's response to her own provocation is a deeply committed recuperation of





Rotten royal wedding.

precisely the political from a range of media texts that deploy the decorative image. Extending her basic proposition further, I would argue that Akhtar does precisely this via her carefully choreographed stylistic choices in MIH: the decorative, "pretty" image remains enmeshed with gender and power in a nearly palpable way, and it is in the interstices of this register and the realist axis that the political emerges in this series. [15] [open endnotes in new page] Bollywood, of course, is particularly adept at constructing pretty images, especially in song sequences etc., a process that reached an apogee in the post-liberalization Yash Chopra-Karan Johar school of filmmaking.

What sets MIH apart from more routine constructions of the pretty image is its reflexivity: even as viewers are offered intensely commoditized, sumptuous spectacles of wealth and consumption, the hyppereality of its construction lies exposed. Put differently, we see the laboring bodies—Karan, Tara, Shibani and construction workers, caterers, and florists—who "stage" the fantasy for consumers both within the diegesis (guests at weddings) and without (audiences watching the show). MIH, therefore, spins elaborate and fantastically beautiful tableaus, only to simultaneously undermine these operations. The relentlessly planned "Bollywood wedding" now consolidated as a specific assemblage of spectacular affects—via movies, but also through celebrity wedding photo-ops in platforms like Instagram, [16] etc.—is, thus, both proffered for pleasurable consumption while being subjected to a radical disassembly.[17]

Notably, the camera moves a great deal in the series, evidence of the fusion of the cinematic and the televisual that Sarandos had described, i.e., episodic content with greatly augmented production values. The camera stalks the characters as following shots, but is especially mobile laterally, almost to emphasize the two-dimensional shallowness of perfectly done up interiors and the people who inhabit these spaces, in baroquely expensive homes and offices. A conspicuous number of shots are taken from outside doors and windows, with the camera playing voyeur, distancing us from opulent interiors. At other times, the camera remains hand-held, uncomfortably close to the action.

However, this "doublespeak" of MIH extends well beyond formal considerations. The fissures between the obsessively designed and carefully orchestrated weddings are also juxtaposed against the ugliness that scaffolds families and weddings in South Asia. The political enters the series through both formal and thematic preoccupations, and especially through the ways in which heterosexual love, marriage and monogamy are dismantled throughout, on both registers I have outlined above. In the very first episode ("All that Glitters is Gold"), the groom's elite family invades the bride, Aliya's, privacy by hiring a private detective to pry into her past. When a youthful pregnancy is revealed, Aliya finally surrenders to a tawdry compromise to secure her financial future. In episode 4, titled "The Price of Love," a seemingly progressive family demands an astronomical dowry from the bride's middle-class parents, with the tacit complicity of the "progressive" groom, Vishal. When Priyanka, the bride, uncovers this horrible secret, she walks out of this extractive and deeply exploitative arrangement.

In fact, if anything ties most of the weddings in the series together, it is the emphasis on the transactional nature of this institution in South Asia: beyond the social and sexual contracts that marriages imply, MIH underscores the grotesque economic and financial stakes that buttress elite weddings in India. We see seemingly progressive, educated, articulate men and women repeatedly surrender to outdated, outmoded and oppressive social and religious norms, powerfully



Wharton graduate marries a tree.

underlining the contested registers of being or becoming modern in South Asia. Here are some examples:

- A Wharton-educated banker, Gitanjali, willingly marries a tree because an
 astrologer deems her to be *manglik* (inauspicious), despite her fiancé's
 objections, and crucially, without his knowledge (Episode 6, "Something
 Old, Something New).
- A young woman in non-metropolitan Ludhiana not only concedes to a ghastly beauty pageant (a remarkable literalization of the arranged marriage market as a meat market) to secure an NRI groom, but also remains silent about his sexual impotency/aggression in order to escape her small-town existence (Episode 5, "A Marriage of Convenience").
- In, Episode 7, "A Royal Affair," the modern bride, Devyani (an airline pilot), covers up her feudal father-in-law's sexual assault on the humble hennaartist by buying the vulnerable Pooja's silence for a paltry five lakh rupees. The wedding that follows is both dazzling and "tasteful," the irony of which is not lost on audiences.





Tara and Adil's shallow habitat.

In almost all the episodes, the great Indian family, the big, fat Indian wedding, the very idea of romantic love, and the heterosexual couple emerge as toxic, corrupt, and irredeemable. This is indeed a stunning indictment of all that Bollywood traditionally celebrates, and MIH's radical politics crystalizes in this mobilization of ideology against aesthetics, as style remains militantly contrapuntal to theme. However, the series goes farther in its reworking of the melodramatic mode, the bulwark of much of Hindi cinema and television.

Queering melodrama

Bollywood melodrama has undergone significant transformations in recent decades. From the opulent, overblown aesthetics of the Chopra-Johar filmic universe, films have pivoted to more grounded and textured storytelling in recent years, often set in real locations in cities and small towns. The genre of the "social message" film mentioned above consolidates on this new terrain, enabled by shifts in the larger political economy of the film industry. A number of scholars have pointed out that gender—and especially the figuration of a "new woman"—has come to be a significant component of these broader changes:

"The new woman stands, poised precariously, on the cusp of tradition and modernity; navigates feudal havelis and transcontinental holidays, arranged marriages and newfound careers; and fulfills her responsibilities towards old parents even as she dabbles in nonmonogamous romantic-sexual escapades—all of this, sometimes with astute insight into the contradictions of her existence, and at

You will never lay your hands on another boy!

Mom beats up teenage Karan for being gay.

other times with the oblivious panache guaranteed only to the most privileged." (Anwer and Arora, 11)

While this new woman—variously imagined, from the "manic pixie" in *Bareilly ki Barfi* (2017) and *Manmarziyaan* (2018) to the trans heroine of *Chandigarh Kare Ashiqui*—is certainly ubiquitous in contemporary Bollywood cinema, her more transgressive sisters have animated less strictly policed domains, like OTT platforms. Partially, these more subversive figures—Kuckoo in *Sacred Games* and Beena, Golu and Sweety in *Mirzapur* to name a few—came to be figurable in OTT shows, because the digital domain has been relatively free from India's draconian censorship regulations, until recently. All indications point towards this situation changing soon, as more and more entities are forced to adhere to the guidelines set by the Government of India, right now dominated by the conservative discourses and propaganda of the Hindu Right.[18]

MIH's foundational strength—and its politics—is to tightly weave the social with the gendered and the sexual. Anwer and Arora note that the show is "almost entirely centered around a gamut of complexly portrayed new women—her ethically dubious and exceedingly aspirational central protagonist, Tara, is depicted with as much compassion and precision as the other host of women who throng the series. Moreover, the empathy of the creators extends to *all* the flawed and unlikable women in MIH—Tara, Shibani, Jazz and Faiza, to cite the principal female characters in the frame story. Even Karan's hysterically homophobic mother, Gayatri, gets etched with a combination of irony and compassion as yet another damaged character.

Socioeconomic, gendered, and sexual enclosures that surround these women determine the choices that are available to them; the murkiness of their morality remains firmly anchored in circumstance. [19] Thus, Shibani's betrayal of her employers' hinges on her inability to make ends meet as a single parent. Jazz embezzles funds from the company to buy fancy clothing because she has never before experienced the luxury that surrounds her workplace. Despite her obvious privileges, Faiza's affair with Adil is more a cry for help than a planned seduction by a seasoned succubus. Tara, the protagonist, is perhaps the most unlikable of all; but MIH takes great pains to contextualize, if not justify her actions. Tara's unflagging drive and her ruthless ambition are scaffolded by her former class position: she crawls out of her lower-middle class existence with cunning, grit, and a steely determination, which also reveal the pitiful limits of her "liberation". Dhulipala's performance is particularly remarkable in this context: muted to the point of being minimalist, her laconic coldness is an impregnable defense against the world. Tellingly, the only occasion on which Tara "breaks down," flies into hysterics, and destroys Faiza's home in a fit of rage, is witnessed solely by the other woman.





Tara destroys Fazia's home in a fit of rage.

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In a notable departure from Akhtar's previous film work, class and social stratification remain at the core of MIH's melodramatic mode, indeed the show presents an astute diagnosis of class disparities and social stratification in contemporary Delhi. In a series of key flashbacks, we see the desperation of Tara's mother as she tries to shepherd her daughters towards a better life. "You have nothing but your beauty to bank on, remember that," she tells them, matter-offact; socially sanctioned sexual submission—via marriage—is the only pathway out of poverty. MIH, unsentimentally, reveals the labor and the struggle that Tara undergoes initially in the neighborhood "finishing school," and thereafter as a secretary in Khanna Industries to fully capitalize on her sexual currency—her only asset in the world she inhabits. When we discover that Tara had indeed manipulated Adil into marrying her by faking a viral sex-tape, this revelation is not presented for its shock value—by this point, Tara is already a fully realized, complex character, both fair and foul, simultaneously vulnerable and deceitful.





Fazia's guilt: I've ben a really shitty, shitty friend....

....My reputation will be ruined.

The moral occult of melodrama, so constitutively dependent on binaries, is foundationally dismantled in MIH: thus, Tara the wife emerges as the seductive (former) gold-digger, while Faiza, the mistress, is a bruised, troubled, and tremulous—the victim par excellence. While Tara doggedly tries to slough off her tarnished past, Faiza is weighed down by guilt and shame for betraying her closest friend, both during and after the inglorious affair with Adil. These impasses and reversals, I would argue, are far from accidental. MIH carefully constructs a world of greed, lust, ambition, and deceit, as the only world figurable in contemporary India. In doing so, it entirely reworks the basic operations of melodrama.

Nowhere is this disassembly more acutely manifest than in the character of Jazz. Jazz, a sophisticated sobriquet for Jaspreet, is a pivotal, alchemic figure in MIH. It is with/through her that we escape the oppressive, hothouse interiors of luxury apartments and the swanky, overly designed offices. The mise-en-scene suddenly opens up, and West Delhi with its dust, crowds, warren of streets and tangled electric wires, becomes a part of the profilmic space. Jazz traverses these two domains fumblingly, is asked to go back to "Dwarka or wherever the fuck you come from," by an infuriated Shibani, but retains her artless sincerity throughout the series. Delhi—so far only a simulacrum of lived spaces—confronts us in all its contradictions. It is simultaneously Tara's and Jazz's city, where the former lives in a cavernous mansion, while the latter comes home to a dingy apartment where elderly parents sit in gloom, and young brothers steal family jewels to support chronic drug habits. Tara sees herself and her past in Jazz—an uncanny mirror image/double that must be conjured away. It is with considerable deliberation that MIH situates Tara and Jazz on a continuum of class and aspiration: for



Real location shooting in West Delhi.



Jazz shops on company credit card.

example, the expensive pleated silk skirt that the latter purchases on the company credit card is an exact copy of the one we see Tara wearing in early episodes of the show.





Jazz luxuriates in bathtub.

Tara wearing her wedding jewels.





Jazz in desperate encounter with an old boyfriend. This scene shows how the libidinal economies are entangled with class and social ones.

Jazz is a haunting presence in MIH; and through her, Delhi—the city that bore the worst brunt of the Partition—startlingly comes into view. When Jazz loses her job at Made in Heaven, her abjection is signaled not only through the pouring rain that she dejectedly walks through, but especially as she lurches back to a desperate sexual encounter with her ex-boyfriend, a working-class, car mechanic. The frenzied coupling in a dirty underground garage potently brings home the double bind of the social and the sexual—as an unemployed young woman from Rohini or Dwarka, this is the only kind of partnership Jazz can aspire to, even as she wears the expensive sodden clothes she had tried to "borrow". It is, an albeit temporary, acceptance of her own precarity as a classed and gendered subject. Thus, libidinal economies are constantly imbricated with the economy as such in MIH; ecologies of desire remain entangled with the social, arguably overdetermined in a certain sense. The show makes no distinction between licit and illicit desires, crystalizing as a provocative critique of consumer capitalism in India. I would argue that this melodramatic orchestration of the social with the affective—what scholar Diedre Pribam evocatively calls "socioemotional"—that reveals the political in MIH.[20] [open endnotes in new window]

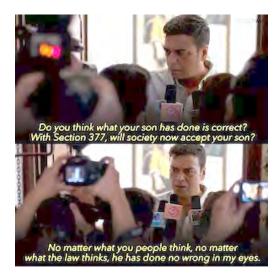
While unruly and disruptive women queer the pitch considerably, MIH also directly addresses the question of homosexuality in India. Indeed, raising pertinent questions about the rights of the LGBTQ citizens is the show's most obviously strident political statement, although it takes specific stances against caste, dowry, religious orthodoxy, patriarchy etc., as well. Karan and his male lovers are routinely harassed by cops, spied on by neighbors, humiliated by strangers, and shunned by their own families. In episode 5, Karan is arrested, brutalized, and nearly raped by a police officer while in custody. He decides to both sue his landlord—a self-hating, closeted, middleclass family man—and files a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) against Article 377 of the Indian constitution, which prohibited all sexual acts "against the order of nature," and had frequently been weaponized against the queer community.[21]



Karan confronts his parents about his sexuality.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema has perceptively observed that the show's politics can also be unravelled at the level of plotting and characterization: Karan's unremarkable personality and circumstances make him relatable to audiences:

"Through the development of Karan's character, we get insight into the performativity and politics of homosexuality in India. Karan is closeted, debt-ridden and struggling for work with his wedding planning company. He is legally and socio-culturally a sexual outcast, but that is not obvious when the audience first encounters him. The audience is first introduced to other aspects of his character, like his insufficient income, his close friends, his professional struggles and his



Karen's father's acceptance.







The final confrontation scene between Tara and Adil employs frenetic handheld camerawork in a tightly controlled mise-en-scene.

entanglement with money lenders before learning about his sexuality. Using this intentional order, the creators of the show invite the audience's emotional investment in Karan's relatable socio-economic struggles. The audience gets no hint about his sexuality at all because of an absence of stereotypical queer mannerisms such as flamboyance, effeminacy or aesthetics, all characteristics which appear inseparable from characters in most other queer portrayals in Indian cinema. This normalising portrait of homosexuality humanises Karan for the audience." [22]

Additionally, Mathur's conventional good looks and naturalistic performance add heft and authenticity to Karan; he remains the most disarmingly approachable character in MIH. However, I would argue that MIH does much more to celebrate queerness through style. As noted above, heterosexual relationships, the couple, and the family are all portrayed as corrupt and unsalvageable as institutions in MIH. Transactional and flimsy, these bonds are constantly threatened from within. In fact, private spaces—even luxurious interiors, bedrooms, and bathrooms—are rife with peril and anxiety in the series. For example, Tara's final confrontation with Adil unfolds in the privacy of their bedroom, but the turbulence of emotions renders this safest of spaces into a battleground: Tara's rage and disappointment are succinctly communicated through an equally frenetic handheld camera. The tightly controlled *mise-en-scene* remains in stark contrast to the chaotic lives that unfold before us.

But I would contend that MIH goes farther in its contra-straight ethics qua style: while heteropatriarchy collapses like the proverbial house of cards, other kinds of love and solidarities emerge. Friendship, especially between women, figure as a constant source of affirmation in MIH. Thus, even after Faiza's monumental betrayal, Tara saves her life by donating blood as the former remains gravely injured following a near-fatal accident. Cross-gender friendships are also critical: Tara and Karan's, Kabir and Jazz's, and even the unlikely camaraderie between Karan and his young neighbour, Mitali, who articulates her repugnance about her parents' homophobia in no uncertain terms.

However, it is in the imaging and imagining of romantic love that MIH makes its most unabashedly melodramatic move; only, in this instance, romantic love unfolds and consolidates on a queer terrain. In his key work on melodrama and queerness, Jonathan Goldberg suggests that,

"[M]elodrama offers more than ...an either/or in which disguise, opacity, and impasse must be exchanged for identity, knowledge and action." [23]

Karan's "track" and character arc—including and especially his activism—I would argue, embody precisely these transformations. But as always, MIH inhabits the melodramatic mode best when affect is hystericized as mise-en-scene. Karan's many encounters with lovers are frequently shot in gorgeous soft focus, the very first one dappled in darkness and light.





Karan's casual sexual encounters.

MIH's depiction of heterosexual couplings remain considerably less poetic and arguably more matter of fact. But even beyond the cinematography and editing that insist on the beauty and sensuality of queer bodies and lovemaking, MIH, reserves its most romantic love story for the gay couple: Karan and Nawab. Throughout the series, Karan remains affectionate towards his lovers, but decidedly commitment phobic regarding stable, long-term relationships; in this sense Karan embodies the youthful efflorescence and endless becoming that characterizes the portrayal of so many gay characters in popular media.

A final series of flashbacks reveal his intense, adolescent attachment to Nawab, and his own betrayal of that love. Bullied by homophobic classmates—including, especially, a defensive Karan—Nawab had been forced to quit high school, losing contact with Karan thereafter. Wracked by guilt, and unable to forget Nawab, Karan flits from one sexual encounter to the next, camouflaging his suffering with an affable promiscuity. In the most deliriously romantic dénouement possible, Nawab—Karan's true love—returns to his life after the PIL lawsuit is filed. Pain, separation, longing, suffering—affective registers typically reserved for heterosexual love stories—are lavished with abandon on the Karan-Nawab final episode, "The Great Escape." From nervous anticipation and tentative flirtation to consummation and inevitable heartbreak, this episode is the very apotheosis of the "Bollywood romance," telescoping the various stages of romantic love into a single unit/episode.



Karan and Nawab as high school classmaters with Karan betraying Nawab





Karan and Nawab's adult courthsip. The most romatic story arc is reserved for the gay couple.





Karan says now, "I can't believe I've loved you so long."

It is certainly no accident that Vikrant Massey, who plays the adult Nawab, is one of the few recognizable Bollywood actors in MIH; the show reserves its most



Karan weeps in anguish after leaving Nawab.



Tara and Karan with her loot.

intense romantic energies for this climactic encounter between the star-crossed lovers. The passionate hotel-room lovemaking is staged with great care and attention, complete with diffused lighting, silk sheets, and a melodic, lilting background score

This is where MIH's aesthetics and politics finally coalesce: as they share a postcoital soak in the tub, Karan, for the first time, reveals the violent near-rape episode. Shot in saturated red illumination, Karan's confession is also a belated apology. "I can't believe I've hated you for so long," muses Nawab; "I can't believe I've loved only you," Karan responds, a revelation that takes them both by surprise. It is the gay couple who tenderly promise to keep in touch, a tantalizing glimpse of futurity that remains closed off to Tara and Adil, for example. Karan weeps in anguish after leaving Nawab, an emotional release that has been supressed for decades. Queer liberation is imaged and imagined with a plenitude that illuminates the political in MIH.

The last scenes of the series feature Karan and Tara reuniting in *Made in Heaven*'s destroyed office-space: right-wing vandals have wrecked the space as payback for Karan's courageous activism. The protagonists—each broken in their own way—share a drink and a joint and promise to make a fresh start, leaving room for future seasons of the series. It is fitting that MIH—a show that privileges certain kinds of loves and intimacies over others—ends its first season on their embrace and solidarity.



The store destroyed by right wing vandals.



The "broken" protagonists promise to make a fresh start.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. I thank Sangita Gopal for her thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of this essay. [return to page 1]
- $2.\ https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/cold-response-on-day-one-atcinema-halls/article 32862860.ece$
- 3. Karan Johar's Dharma Productions released *Drive* (2019) and *Gehraiyaan* (2022) directly on OTT platforms. Even more radically, the Amitabh Bachchan starrer *Gulabo Sitabo* was released on Amazon Prime Video in June 2020. *Shakuntala Devi*, starring Vidya Balan (2020) was released on Amazon Prime Video, *Gunjan Saxena* (2020), *Sadak 2* (2020), and several other films have circumvented the theatrical network for quick returns on OTT platforms. At least 18-20 other films have already been promised to OTT platforms, according to trade analyst Komal Nahata: https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=b_020uBzJQM. For a list of films and shows scheduled for OTT releases in 2022, see https://www.vogue.in/culture-and-living/content/22-of-the-biggest-indian-ott-releases-in-2022-netflix-amazon-prime-hotstar
- 4. In an interview with film critic Anupama Chopra, Akhtar struck an enthusiastic note, saying, "I think what's happened in the pandemic is that everyone is watching content on streamings [sic]...Weirdly, the cinematic world has gotten smaller. So, I see a lot of amazing tie-ups...there's awareness of other industries, awareness of other artists...the digital world is a portal, and that's opened many doors. And we are going to be all over the world." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNmswr822_4&t=1871s
- 5. Interview with Anupama Chopra, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyFcaa-3n8I
- 6. Leyda et. Al. Post Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film, 2.
- 7. Ishita Tiwari has noted the distinct ways in which pricing and other marketing strategies bestows a definite edge to Amazon Prime Video as a hydra-headed, integrated platform in India: "Amongst the three major video streaming platforms in India (Amazon Prime Video, HotStar, Netflix), Amazon Prime Video is the cheapest platform to subscribe to amongst the three as is costs Rs. 499 (\$7) a year, which works to Rs. 42 (\$0.58) a month. In India, non-Prime subscribers will be able to use Amazon Prime at a price of Rs. 129 (\$1.79) per month. Amazon offers a number of benefits to its Prime members in India. Prime members get free scheduled delivery, discounted same-day delivery, exclusive deals, unlimited access to video streaming via Prime Video and an ad-free access to playlists via Prime Music. Over time, analysts expect Amazon's local content investments, product integration and tie-ups with local telecom companies to be the key drivers for Amazon Prime Video." Tiwari, "Amazon Prime Video: A Platform Ecosphere" in Athique and Parthasarathi eds. *Platform Capitalism in India*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2020, 87-106.

- 8. See Broadcast Audience Rating Council (BARC) Statistics for 2021 here: https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/tv-owning-households-in-india-grew-6-9-to-210-mln-in-two-years-barc-121041500923_1.html
- 9. See, for example, Tandon, Aviksha, "Here's What We Know About Made In Heaven Season 2 Release," May 5, 2022, https://www.shethepeople.tv/film-theatre/made-in-heaven-season-2-release/
- 10. Her recently announced show for Netflix, titled *The Archies*, is facing a similar round of audience backlash for its focus on upper-class youth culture, just hours after the trailer was released on May 14, 2022. The trailer is also receiving considerable backlash for its cast, which includes superstar Shah Rukh Khan's daughter, Suhana Khan.
- 11. Bose, Nandana. "Globalization, Reflexivity and Genre in Zoya Akhtar's Films," in *Behind the Scenes: Contemporary Bollywood Directors and their Cinema*, Sage, 2017. 215-226, 223
- 12. https://www.firstpost.com/bollywood/dil-dhadakne-do-review-a-terrific-movie-about-rich-people-problems-and-no-its-not-corny-2280984.html
- 13. https://scroll.in/article/731293/the-zoya-akhtar-interview-are-my-movies-about-rich-people-what-does-that-mean
- $14. \ \underline{https://theprint.in/opinion/with-gully-boy-zoya-akhtar-is-no-longer-the-princess-of-posh-peoples-pain/194034/$
- 15. The other titles mentioned above do not stray from the credence bestowed by the realist register; in those texts, the "seriousness" of themes remain scaffolded by a singular commitment to verisimilitude and to the invocation of realism effects. [return to page 2]
- 16. Some recent celebrity couples whose weddings have generated enormous interest and attention include cricketer Virat Kohli and actor Anushka Sharma, actor Priyanka Chopra and singer Nick Jonas, actors Deepika Padukone and Ranveer Singh, and actors Katrina Kaif and Vicky Kaushal, among many others. The fantasy nuptials of these "Bollywood" couples integrates into their stardom seamlessly. In fact, having a spectacular and exclusive destination wedding, whose photographs can then circulate rapidly in a frenzied loop of virality, has come to be a key component of how stardom and celebrity is constituted in contemporary India.
- 17. Commenting on the construction of the Bollywood wedding in *Band Bajaa Baraat*, Baidurya Chakrabarty writes, "In a sort of ethnographic gaze turned inward, it, in this film, examines the "reality" of wedding planning, a new entrepreneurial, informal and "socialized" activity influenced by what is known as the "Bollywood" aesthetic...In such films, Bollywood to be used to transform the real into the ideal." "Beyond the Couple Form," 61. While the weddings in MIH are rarely staged in middle-class *mohallas*, the principle of the reflexive, inward-looking gaze persists.
- **18**. https://www.livemint.com/industry/media/content-creators-fear-self-censorship-as-ott-platforms-go-mainstream-11640931364837.html
- 19. Sangita Gopal has insightfullyointed out that, "Bollywood's 'new women' refuse to be victimized and through grit, courage, determination, or spontaneous action achieve their goals. Most of all, they learn how to look out for themselves. As such, they are the exemplary subjects of a neoliberal order, with its emphasis on transformation whereby the subject evolves by casting off or migrating out of

the social conditions and cultural scripts that 'hold them back.'" Gopal, Sangita, "Lethal Acts: Bollywood's New Woman and the Nirbhaya Effect," in *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, eds. Anwer and Arora, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021. 40-53, 41.

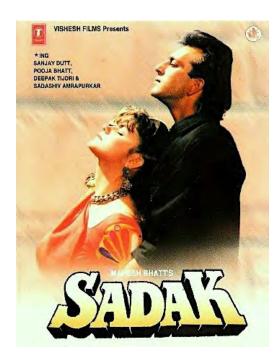
- 20. Pribam, Diedre. "Melodrama and the Aesthetics of Emotion." In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*. Edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, Columbia University Press, 2018. 237-251. [return to page 3]
- 21. Article 377 was finally struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court and homosexuality decriminalized in 2018, after decades of legal and political struggle by queer activists and allies.
- 22. Cheema, "Queer Love: He is also *Made in Heaven*" in Magazine and Shields eds. *ReFocus*: *The Films of Zoya Akhtar*, Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming.
- 23. Goldberg, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility*, Duke University Press, 2016. 8.

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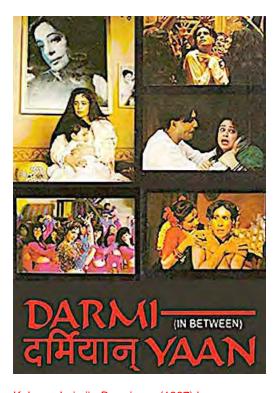


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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mahesh Bhatt's *Sadak* (1991) has an intersex character, Maharani..



Kalpana Lajmi's Darmiyaan (1997) has an

An exploration of intersex characters in Indian cinema

by Kamran Qureshi

I am writing this exploration with a focus on only Indian intersex citizens' representation in feature film in order to achieve a theoretical construct about screen gender within an overview of the Indian film industry. Intersex people have been largely ignored in Indian fiction films where intersex is still considered a taboo subject. Some scholars like Sanjay Karla (2012), Toyeba Mushtaq (2019), Jhimli Bhattacharjee (2014) and Pushpinder Kaur (2017) [open reference page in new window | have attempted to discuss umbrella terms transgender, third gender and hijra but have not discussed the representation of intersex people separately, blurring them with other identities. All these terms-hijra, transgender, and third gender—are used in India as umbrella terms for people who identify as a eunuch, kinnar, khwaja sara, khunsa, moorat, rani, transgender, or intersex. Such terms are used interchangeably for intersex in Indian films, scholarly work, and general reference culturally. They often blur sex, gender and/or sexual orientation, such as Sanjay Karla (2012) does when he states, "[s]ome eunuchs are born with intersex disorders of sexual differentiation." According to the United Nations definition, intersex people are

"born with sex characteristics that do not fit typical definitions for male or female bodies, including sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal patterns, and/or chromosome patterns. [...] According to experts, between 0.05 per cent and 1.7 per cent of the population is born with intersex traits." (UNOHCHR, 2019: 2)

I argue that because Indian filmmakers have not paid attention to explaining intersex variations of their characters and most of the time have used umbrella terms such as *hijra* and *third gender*, sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between intersex and different social identities shown on screen, including transgender and eunuch. Christopher Michael Erlinger (2016) argues that Indian hijras "practice total castration." Gayatri Reddy (2005) has the same stance and argues that

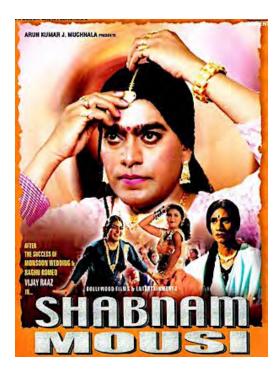
"hijras are phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation—that is, an excision of the penis and testicles—dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata."

Reddy's explanation of hijras is the same as the definition of eunuch given above. These types of extreme traditions in India have only been practiced by some men for their sacrificial religious beliefs but are not common in the modern Indian society as norms. The term *hijra* has evolved from an Arabic word *Hijrah*, literally meaning migration (from one gender to another) and is used for transgender people who transition from one gender to another or third gender or no gender (see Carpenter, 2022, p272). The term eunuch is considered as a subcategory of

intersex character, Emmi.



Mahesh Bhatt's *Tamanna* (1998) has an intersex character, Tikku.



Yogesh Bharadwaj's *Shabnam Mausi* (2005) has an intersex character, Shabnam.



hijra in Southeast Asian societies (see Qureshi, 2022b, p178).

Here I wish to provide a historical account by textual and narrative analysis of eight Indian films including Bollywood (Hindi cinema), Malayalam cinema, and Telugu cinema (although there are other languages films made in India such as Bengali). They all have at least one intersex character shown on screen or discussed by other characters; they were made in the last 30 years between 1991 to the time of writing this paper. Among these films, *Sadak* (1991), *Darmiyaan* (1997), *Tamanna* (1998), *Shabnam Mausi* (2005), *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008), *Queens! Destiny of Dance (QDOD)* (2011), *Ardhanari* (2016), and *Eka* (2018) have intersex characters. The film *Ardhanari* (2016) has a male protagonist disguised as an intersex. *Eka* is a Malayalam and *Ardhanari* is a Telugu language film; the rest of the selected six movies are in the Hindi language. My selection is based on publicly available movies with intersex characters.

I also want to investigate the ideology behind the treatment of these characters, that is, what these films suggest about the intersex-related issues in Indian society. I want to look at the ways or patterns in which these characters have been stereotyped in Indian films that do have some apparent and some ambiguous intersex characters. I stress that while entertaining the audience, Indian cinema including Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and Tamil language films is one of the largest global film industries; and so it has an important role and responsibility to educate society about gender-related issues and to create awareness about sex variations. As a practising academic in film and television, I use an analytical lens combined with my directorial experience of a multi-award-winning, romantic drama feature film *Only Love Matters (OLM)* (2022), some past television projects, and research studies on the subject of intersex.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

In my doctoral research on English language intersex films I found only eight films made in English-language cinema with lead intersex characters including the US, UK, and Australia (Qureshi, 2022a); however the data from Indian regional film industries is not fully available to confirm a precise number. Intersex films from both English-language and Indian industries are mostly low budget independent films lacking in production quality. Out of the eight selected films, only three—Shabnam Mausi, Darmiyaan, and Eka—trace the intersex characters' lives from birth or childhood, confirming that these characters are born intersex. In the rest of the four films—Sadak, Tamanna, QDOD and Welcome to Sajjanpur—the fact of intersex is more vague and can only be determined by the clues given in the verbal dialogue. There are some more Indian movies with characters who can be described under the umbrella terms transgender and hijra, and who display some non-binary identities. These films include Bombay (1995), Masti (2004), Murder 2 (2011), Rajjo (2013), Peranbu (2018) and Super Deluxe (2019) with no discussion or appearance of intersex characters.

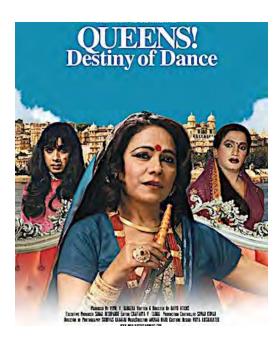
In terms of medical definitions, there are over 30 intersex variations represented in a U.S. national health study (Rosenwohl-Mack et al., 2020: 5) and over 40 traits listed in an Australian study (Jones et al., 2016: 17). A North American advocacy organization for young intersex people, InterACT (2019), divides intersex traits into three archetypes:

- 1. Mixed sex traits that usually do not go together,
- 2. "Overdevelopment" of one binary sex,
- 3. "Underdevelopment" or difference.

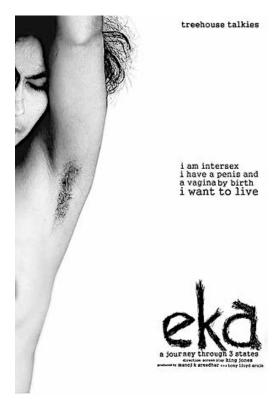
Internationally, the parents and society usually try to force infants to be identified in the binary genders as either a male or a female.

India's The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (TTPA) 2019, defines

Shyam Benegal's *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) has an intersex character, Munnibai.



David Atkins's *Queens! Destiny of Dance* (*QDOD*) (2011) has intersex characters, Guru Amma and Mukta.



Prince John's *Eka* (2018) has an intersex character, Eka.

transgender as,

"a person whose gender does not match with the gender assigned to that person at birth and includes trans-man or trans-woman, person with intersex variations, genderqueer and person having such sociocultural identities as *Kinner*, *Hijra*, *Aravani* and *Jogta*."

That Act (2019) considers a person with intersex variations under the umbrella term, transgender, and blurs intersex people with the other identities just mentioned by labelling them all transgender. Intersex individuals need to be seen separately from transgender and LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) people. LGB is a sexual orientation whereas intersex is a "real biological variation" (ISNA, 2022), not an individual's choice of gender. In particular, intersex people have problems different from those of transgender people such as non-consensual childhood surgeries (see InterAct, 2016). I will only discuss people who are born with a variation of sex characteristics in Indian films, and I will use the term intersex in this study as it is widely used by the UN, the US and the UK's research studies and intersex organisations. The term *intersex* came into use in the early 20th century as a scientific and medical term; previously the term 'Hermaphrodite' was used extensively by medical practitioners throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (The Council of Europe, 2015: 15).

Now the question arises why are intersex people subsumed under the rubric of either transgender or hijra? In India, intersex people have either never been publicly prominent to claim an identity of their own, because of the hatred they received from society or took shelter under the hijra community due to being different from men and women. They either did not have enough information and awareness about their bodies in the past or were told to keep quiet because discussing this subject was always a taboo. Arpita Das (2022) notes that

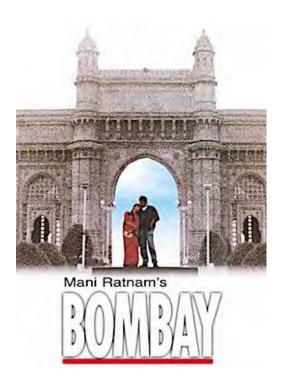
"[p]eople with intersex variations and their families are often encouraged to maintain secrecy around intersexuality. Often, intersex people are not told about their variation or the medical interventions they may have gone through during their infancy."

After the intersex people in other countries started coming to the limelight with their stories and are asking to be accepted as intersex instead of categorising them in binary or other gender identities, some Indian intersex citizens now are also standing apart from hijra and/or transgenders. They are claiming their intersex identity, and are trying to connect and align with international intersex people and organisations such as Intersex Asia (2021). An example of this can be seen in the film *Queens! Destiny of Dance* (2011), (discussed later), which gave a message of making strong relationships with foreign intersex people and to build a global intersex community. In the film, the intersex people arrange an event and invite the foreign delegates of intersex people to participate and socialise. The intersex movement in India started recently in 2021 (Intersex Asia, 2021), although *Eka* (discussed later) has used the term intersex in 2018.

I use Stuart Hall's representation theory to study how intersex characters have been represented in Indian films as part of Indian culture and society. He explains that representation "involves the use of language, of signs and images" and by "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people," (Hall, 1997:1) In theory, Hall considers representation to be a necessary part of the process through which meanings are produced and exchanged. I study the language and the visuals together to explore how the intersex characters are portrayed. One of the things I have looked for in my research is to see if and how health issues for intersex people in India have been discussed in Indian films, such as the surgical intervention on intersex children to reassign gender as a male or a female, or counselling for parents and



Kamran Qureshi's British film *Only Love Matters* (2022) has an English and an Indian intersex characters.



Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) displayed a transgender character.

children. A leading transgender rights activist Aqsa Shaikh's states, that in India

"intersex people are treated as disabled and approached through a medical lens leading to sex reassignment interventions that cause long-term complications in them and warrant a lifetime of treatment and care." (Tandon, 2021).

Although "[l]ittle is known about the use of intersex subjects for medical research in India" (Das, 2022) but legal awareness has recently started:

"India's Tamil Nadu state government has issued an executive order banning medically unnecessary surgeries on children born with intersex variations" (Knight, 2019).

"The Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) has directed the Delhi Government to ban medically unnecessary sexchange surgeries on intersex infants and ensure their bodily integrity." (Tandon, 2021).

Of interest to me is how the social problems of intersex in India are highlighted in Indian films, with plot developments including discrimination in education, sports, employment, physical and sexual violence in and outside of the home. I look here at specific films to determine the importance of the intersex characters in these films and to explore what variations Indian film directors encode as "meaningful." Usually such characters have minor roles. It is as Kimberly Zieselman notes, the intersex characters so far in the media history had smaller roles and have never been respectfully presented (Peitzman, 2014). [2]

Mushtaq (2019) also claims,

"Bollywood's representation of the third gender [intersex and transgender people] is more complex and problematic than western countries. Western countries are very liberal in their image usage and do not encourage humorous and shallow representations."

I humbly disagree with Mushtaq's point of view. To provide a few U.S. examples, there is no intersex character in NBC's long-running comedy series *Friends* (1994-2004) (2001 | Season 8 | Episode 9: 'The One with the Rumor'); but to create comedy, in one episode, a rumour is spread at school about Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston) that she is "hermaphrodite" (intersex) and "had both male and female reproductive parts" due to her rude behaviour. In another, in the Netflix teen comedy *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (2018), again no intersex character is physically present, but only for the sake of comedy one character tells another about Sierra Burgess (Shannon Purser) that she

"can't hear anything that I say, so even if I say something like 'she's a hermaphrodite'—which she isn't—she's not, she's not a hermaphrodite at all... She is all lady parts."

Most of the intesex and transgender people who live together in groups as communities in India and Pakistan, follow a maternalistic leadership pattern where they have a hierarchy system for decision making and problem solving. They have embraced their own customs, traditions, rules and regulations which the members need to follow. They make families in their communities, one living as a mother Guru and adopts children (can be adults) who live as sisters in a house as shown in *Murad* (2003). Although not all the leaders act in the same way, there might be some corrupt elements present in the leadership of these groups. I discuss this in detail later in this study. There are many subcultural groups of intersex and transgenders who might not have same traditions. Some intersex even feel insecure with having transgenders in their group as mentioned

in the film *Ardhnaari*, which I discuss later. However, the intersex and transgenders where live together or in separate groups, usually do not have caste and religious differences among them and excercise interfaith practice such as in *Shabnam Mausi*.

At this point, I would like to turn specifically to Indian cinema and shall describe each film, one by one. These descriptions are heavy on plot summary since most of my readers will not have seen the films. Although most are melodramas with extreme situations, the incidents and characterization usefully point to aspects of society at large and to common attitudes that people hold.





NBC's comedy series *Friends* (1994-2004) (2001 | Season 8 | Episode 9: 'The One with the Rumor'.

Sierra Burgess is a Loser (2018) comedy scene with discussion of hermaphrodite.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Pooja and Ravi discuss that the birds won't fly away because the city is horrible.



Sadashiv Amrapurkar as intersex woman, a brothel owner pimp, Maharani.



Ravi stabs Maharani before escaping with Pooja to save her from prostitution.

Sadak (dir: Mahesh Bhatt, 1991)

The Indian romantic thriller *Sadak* was directed by famous Indian director Mahesh Bhatt. It introduces an intersex pimp character, Maharani (Sadashiv Amrapurkar), who traffics women into forced prostitution in her brothel. She is drawn as a cunning person who has a strict monitoring network and surveillance system to keep these women from escaping from the brothel or marrying. Sex work in the lives of gender variant communities is a complex issue, though not all sex work is forced and not all clients are violent. In many South Asian countries, there are specific locations for the forced prostitution business where women are sold like animals and are sexually abused every day by different clients. *Sadak* shows women who are kept by force under strict conditions in brothels.

Sex work in India is not limited to women only and scholarship on sex work has criticized the victim and perpetrator binaries. Reddy (2005) states,

"at least half of the current hijra (including intersex) population (at least in Hyderabad) engages in prostitution." [open references in new window]

Influential pimps who run these businesses for themselves or sometimes for corrupt political figures or rich people. They employ henchmen who even commit murders on their orders. Syeda Afshana and Heeba Din (2017) state:

"Sadak came as a revolution in the portrayal of third gender, as in this movie the third gender is being brought to the centre from the periphery. The movie not only breaks the mould by bringing third gender to the centre, but also shattered the norm of a masculine villain of Hindi cinema by casting a villainous eunuch Hijra."

We do not know if the pimp Maharani faced castration, hence she cannot be categorised as an eunuch; and Afshana and Din's use of three terms—third gender, eunuch and hijra—for intersex character shows that these are still confused with intersex in India. Afshana and Din in fact explain how an intersex character has a main role for the first time in Hindi cinema. It is as a villain: the intersex character is evil and enhances already existing negative perceptions of intersex people.

Pooja's (Pooja Bhatt) uncle brings her to Maharani's brothel to get his daughter released in return. He must repay the money that he and his brother, Pooja's father, together borrowed from Maharani for the father's medical treatment but were never able to return. After Pooja's father passed away, Maharani captured her cousin, demanding her money back. Pooja's uncle prefers to save his daughter over his niece.

Ravi (Sanjay Dutt), a taxi driver, sees Pooja for the first time in the middle of the road; she's trying to set her birds free before going to the brothel. Ravi tells her that the birds will not fly away because they are scared of this city; it is horrible. His words indicate the immorality in the city and its lack of concern for the vulnerable. Ravi meets Pooja again at Maharani's brothel where he comes with his friend Gotiya (Deepak Tijori), who wants to marry a sex worker there, Chanda



Maharani and her men crucify Ravi for helping Pooja elope.



Maharani pushes Ravi's sister to death in the hospital after the girl runs away from Maharani's brothel.



Ravi sets Maharani's place ablaze.



Ragnar as an intersex villain in Never Too Young to Die (1986).

(Neelima Azeem). Ravi bids on Pooja and wins her for her first night of sex work but falls in love with her. Maharani guesses next day that they did not have sex; she does so only by looking at Pooja's walk. Maharani refuses to let Ravi bid for Pooja a second time but then allows it only on the condition that he will have sex with Pooja in her presence. By having girls raped for their first time, she wants to exploit them by taking their virginity away. The exterior of the set made for Maharani's brothel is very near to what the prostitution places in some parts of India originally look like and the word "Kotha" (meaning upper floor) is specifically used for brothels.

Some may arguably compare *Sadak* with Martin Scorsese's award-winning film *Taxi Driver* (1976) where Robert De Niro (plays Travis) as a taxi driver witnesses prostitution and crimes during night shift's driving. He shoots the pimp and has a fight with a bouncer and himself is shot by a brothel client, in his effort to save a 12-year old girl being used as a prostitute. Both Ravi and Travis are shown as taxi drivers and as having post-traumatic stress, both confide in another taxi driver friend. Both work out and have strong bodies, both try to save girls in a mainstream city of the country from prostitution and face severe injuries in the process but succeed in their motive.

Ravi stabs Maharani and escapes with Pooja, Gotiya and Chanda. Gotiya and Chanda are killed by Maharani's men just after they get married and Pooja is captured again. Maharani and her men beat Ravi, then crucify him, leaving him to die. Ravi's memories of Pooja and his sister, who also died after being captured and kept at Maharani's brothel for two years, fill him with hatred for Maharani and enough strength to set himself free. After a long fight, Ravi succeeds in defeating Maharani and he saves Pooja.

Maharani's character gets lines to talk about the problems of intersex people. She mentions to Pooja that crying will not change her destiny (the brothel) and that she (herself) cried a lot when people called her *Naamard* (not male). Maharani said it was her destiny to become a *hijra* [to wear female attire and to be known as intersex].

In this way, the film explicitly refers to one of the major issues some intersex people (those who have a manly body) have in South Asian societies: they are forced to appear as males. If they do not talk, walk, and dress as expected from a man, they face violence, hatred, discrimination, and segregation from their families. The dialogue indicates that Maharani was born intersex and brought up as a male, but due to her appearance and sex characteristics she faced social discrimination which led her to start a criminal business and take revenge. She now employs men instead of working for them and has become a symbol of fear. She wears bangles and nail enamel and dresses in both types of clothes, men's and women's. Along with her costuming, the director uses low key lighting to enhance the darkness and negativity of her character. The hairstyles, choice of colours and style of clothes make Maharani's personality more bizarre.

The film also gives a hint towards the sex variation of Maharani though it is not clearly mentioned; either she has mixed male and female genitals or has no penis or a non-functional penis. She gets excited when she sees the innocent face of Pooja and praises the young woman's beauty. She tells Pooja to not be scared of her as she is "half man and half woman," so she cannot do anything (sexually). Maharani reminds me of other intersex characters—Ragnar of the U.S. film *Never Too Young to Die* (1986) and Casey Kaufman of *Terror Firmer* (1999). All three characters are evil serial killers, and the films are examples of cult cinema. The cult cinema "acts as an umbrella term which refers to a number of values, most often denoting the 'norms' of film production, textuality, and consumption"



Casey Kaufman as an intersex serial killer in *Terror Firmer* (1999).



Suhail Asgher as intersex woman Saima, in *Murad* (2003) trying to console orphan child Murad (Tabraiz Shah) with her other intersex friends Naddo (Nabeel Zafar) and Bobo (Qazi Wajid). Asgher won a special award at The first Indus Drama Award 2005, for his performance in this character.

(Mathijs and Sexton, 2012) and may display sex, profanity, and/or violence. The films are from almost the same period of late 1980s and 90s when Hollywood and Bollywood both depicted intersex characters as freaks.

Using intersex characters for murderer roles can be avoided if there is no solid justification and use of it. Kaur (2017) explains that in *Sadak*,

"there was a constant reiteration of the harmful myths associated with the trans community, ultimately creating a stereotype in Indian mainstream culture."

One of these myths was to show Maharani to be a sex business owner displaying and stereotyping intersex and trans people involved in sex business. The reason behind this stereotyping is because the intersex and transgender people are mostly subjected or forced to be in a sex business in Asian countries due to facing high discrimination in getting paid work. Director and Producer Sanjay Leela Bhansali's recently released film *Gangubai Kathiawari* (2022) also introduces a similar intersex pimp character Raziabai (Vijay Raaz), in a minor villainous role against the protagonist, Gangubai, played by Mahesh Bhatt's second daughter, Alia Bhatt. Although, Bhansali has looked deep into the issues of prostitute women, he has not paid any attention and ignored the issues of intersex people. This film also shows that intersex characters are still being presented in a negative light.

Sadak also has other similarities with above mentioned films and follows the same pattern as *Never Too Young to Die* in showing the intersex character as an extraordinarily clever person. Maharani calls herself "the King of brothels." She states in her conversation with Pooja:

"Look, I have dull colour complexion and no beauty, this is my fate. If I have something, that is a brain. Yes... I have a highly intelligent mind. That's why I serve men and sexually exploit women."

Through the above dialogue, similar to some of the English language films' intersex characters such as Ragnar in *NTYTD* and Casey in *Terror Firmer*, the film emphasizes the extra mental abilities of intersex people falsely claiming them different from ordinary human beings. The film sometimes uses an odd or different character to make the movie commercially attractive and same is the case with Sadak. While the film is mainly based on women's issues, to attract the audience it has used an intersex character in a villain's role, with no valid justification for that. South Asian screens, though, accept intersex characters in main leads like in *Tamanna* and *Sadak*, and artists who have played intersex characters are critically acclaimed such as Amrapurkar won an award for his performance for Maharani and similarly Suhail Asghar (2005) won the award for best performance for his character Saima in *Murad*.

Darmiyaan (dir: Kalpana Lajmi, 1997)

Darmiyaan in Hindi means 'in between,' not typical male or female. It was directed by Kalpana Lajmi, who was a documentary director who often worked on sexual social issues, including prostitution, marital violence, and extra marital affairs. Darmiyaan relates the story of a top film actress Zeenat and her intersex son Emmi. Zeenat lives with her mother and 7-year-old son Emmi, having no older male family member although her sister and brother-in-law work as her staff on her film sets. The intersex character has been placed at the centre of the narrative that highlights his life struggle from his childhood till death. The film demonstrates the many ways that keeping and raising the intersex children at

home in India is a laborious task due to social responses both to these children and also to their parents and families.





Proud Zeenat is served by her sister and brother in law while filming on set, being a top actress.

Zeenat having a dance performance at home sold out to rich private audience.

The film starts with Emmi (Emmad-ud-din), who is looking at Zeenat (Kiron Kher) in awe, imitating the mother's actions, putting lipstick on and wishing to be like her. In the film, Zeenat is 1946's top singer-actress wanted by every director and producer. The grandmother Amma (Zeenat's mother) sees this and tells Emmi that men should have a moustache and they should not wear lipstick. She forces him to live as a boy.

Some parents hide the truth or provide false information to intersex children about their bodies, which proves devastating for these children; e.g., in another film Both (2005), Rebecca is shocked to find out as an adult about being born intersex, but her mother still lies to her. Similarly, in *Darmiyaan* Emmi is born intersex with underdeveloped genitals and he explores his intersex variation at a young age while playing with other kids. In his 'discovery' sequence, boys are having a peeing competition at the beach in which they take off their pants and see whose pee would go farthest. Emmi stoops down whilst urinating and a boy asks why he needs to sit to pee, he is not a girl; the friend then realises that Emmi does not have a penis. All the boys start shouting that Emmi is a girl while standing in a circle around him. Emmi is naive and tries to understand the situation but he does not know why he is like that. In fact, this plot development represents a common social occurrence for such children. They explore their sex variations outside of their families and what they learn comes as a shock to them. In the film, when Emmi gets confused he runs into his house and asks Amma where his penis is. Amma tells him that he has not lost his penis, but it is only small and will be okay when he grows up. The child cries for his penis. Such a depiction of childhood discovery points towards the need for counselling services for parents of intersex children on how they can make their children aware of their intersex bodies.



Intersex character Emmi trying to wear lipstick while copying his mother Zeenat.



Emmi squats to urinate while other boys stand.



Champa forces Emmi to go with her forever.



Zeenat assures Emmi he will not be sent with Champa.



Zeenat has intimate relationship with Kumar spending time with him in her bedroom at home.

In Indian society, some intersex and transgender adults follow and kidnap intersex children thinking that these children belong to them. An example in this film is Champa (Sayaji Shinde) (identity is not revealed; she could be an intersex, transgender, or eunuch). She teases Emmi by picking him up in the air while he is playing in the street and asking him to go and live with her because he is a hijra. He protests so Champa sets him free; Emmi then runs home and hugs Zeenat saying he is not a hijra. In Indian culture Hijra, Chakka and Zankha are all derogatory terms. When Champa follows the child into his house, Zeenat confronts Champa and chastises her for her demanding and irritating behaviour. She tells Champa that's why people hate intersex and transgender persons: "they are all the same, vulgar, ill-mannered and rude." In social terms, since many intersex and transgender people are not accepted by their families in Indian society, they face discrimination in schools and at home, which results in them mostly dropping out and remaining illiterate. Some may behave the way Zeenat mentions, with her ideological condemnation, but not all do; in terms of media depiction, in contrast to this, similar characters in the drama series *Moorat* (2004) are very well behaved.

Twelve years later, Emmi as an adult (Arif Zakaria) becomes a personal assistant to Zeenat on her film sets. *India Today* (1995) wrote that Emmi's role was offered to a famous actor Shah Rukh Khan who was "reluctant" to do the role of a "hermaphrodite." My research shows that intersex is a taboo subject in South Asian society so that actors and even their families struggle to accept intersex roles. In the media industries in India, famous actors often hesitate to do such roles because they fear for their reputation. For example, Suhail Asghar (2005) stated at the first Indus Drama Award that his "children were not in the favour of [his] doing this character [Saima, an intersex mother], they got very cross."

Overall Emmi's character is depicted as understanding, compassionate, and humble, not only with her mother but with other people as well. He must take the burden of Zeenat's shameful activities when she falls for every handsome man she works with, [e.g., Inder Kumar whom she instantly falls in love with] and starts passing time with a man in her bedroom although her mother, son and other family members are in the house. She also gambles and drinks alcohol, treats producers, directors, crew and cast in a disparaging manner, and loses acting contracts because of her irresponsible tardiness and rudeness. She confronts the director and degrades the new actress Chitra (Tabu) who is cast in her place. Emmi tries to stop her and asks his grandmother to talk to Zeenat as well, without success.

The film presents a brutal facet of society and it also takes on mental health issues and suicidal behaviour in individuals. When Emmi must take up his position as provider, as the sole male member of the family, he has to face insulting behaviour from producers like Gulati when he asks for his mother's back pay. Gulati calls him 'Chakka' to ridicule him, and calls Zeenat a prostitute. Emmi loses his patience and attacks Gulati, who then beats him. Emmi's father Javed (Vihang Nayak), a film studio owner, until this point not yet introduced in the film, saves him but out of shame.



Emmi attacks Gulati for insulting Zeenat and calling him a Zankha (non-male).



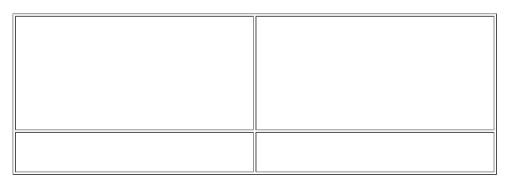
Emmi with his father Javed and his half brother.



The prostitute sent by Emmi's uncle to sexually harrass Emmi insults him when she touches him and finds out he is an intersex with no penis.



Emmi joins Champa's group after having financial pressures when Zeenat's career collapses.



The father hesitates to publicly accept that this young man is his son. He says Emmi is his brother-in-law, though Emmi realises the relationship. Furthermore, Javed introduces Aslam to Emmi, as his only son, but cannot declare publicly that Emmi is also his son, from Zeenat, due to him being intersex.

Like Maharani's dialogue in *Sadak*, this film also gives characters lines to assert that intersex people are sexually inactive and incapable, a socially common ideological projection. When Zeenat fires her sister Ameena and her husband Sajjad from her entourage, they turn against her and in revenge send a prostitute to exploit Emmi sexually to defame him. The prostitute finds out that Emmi has a very small or no penis, and angrily accuses him with the insulting words chakka, hijra and *namard* (impotent) which affect him deeply. Insults lead to his extreme feelings of helplessness and disappointment which add to Emmi's difficulties coming to terms with life as an ordinary human being.

In South Asia, the discrimination against intersex in finding positions in educational institutions and workplaces puts extra economic pressure on them. Often they are forced to take up dancing and begging as a way to earn money. After Zeenat's professional career collapses and she becomes mentally disabled, Emmi must finally turn towards Champa to join their group, but dressed as a woman. In one scene the transgender and intersex group members raise issues they used to face in the society of 1960s India,, including not being able to travel by train, not being eligible to vote, not allowed to open a bank account and not being taken as virile.

Darmiyaan calls attention to serious issues of workplace sexual harassment and forced prostitution. Instead of having sympathy for Emmi, Champa sells his innocence, allowing him to be raped by a group of men on his first day of work. This event is reminiscent of the Pakistani film *Bol* (2011) where an intersex child, Saifullah Khan/Saifi (Amr Kashmiri), is raped at work, and out of embarrassment his father Hakim Sahib (Manzar Sehbai) kills him.





Emmi is being raped on his first day of dancing work as a female impersonator, planned by Champa to engage Emmi in prostitution. Emmi confronts Champa and her group after his rape and is told without prostitution they cannot earn enought to run their houses.

Here, Emmi returns to Champa's place to find that the rape was planned and not incidental. Champa's character resembles Guru Amma's character in the film *Shabnam Mausi* who was running a covert sex business; however, Champa and her group do prostitution blatantly. In the sex business, then, it is a custom that the new member is trapped and gets raped on their first day in work so that they will have less resistance to entering prostitution. This was also a plot element in *Ishq Ki Inteha* (2009) where a young woman Bakhtawar is sent to get a file signed by a client, but gets raped by the customer on her first day of work. Emmi is also told that the dance earnings are never enough for transgender and intersex people to live on so they have no other choice of work except prostitution, reminding him brutally that he is neither a man nor a woman.





Emmi picks up the abandoned baby from garbage.

Champa and group come to get Emmi back.

While sitting and crying on a street at night, Emmi hears a baby crying and finds an abandoned newborn in a corner. He brings the baby home. Champa, who is not ready to lose Emmi, comes with her group to get him back. Upon hearing the baby's cries, they accuse Emmi of stealing the baby and ridicule him; they ask what the baby will call him, a mother or a father, indicating society's unwillingness to accept the intersex in parental roles.

In the colonial rule, "British administrators claimed that Hijras [intersex and transgender people]—or 'eunuchs' in colonial parlance—were 'habitual sodomites,' beggars, an obscene presence in public space and the kidnappers and castrators of children" (Hinchy, 2019). The movie claims there is a criminal activity of children's castration by groups of intersex and trans people to increase the number of group members. When Champa is unable to convince Emmi to return to her, she kidnaps the baby to castrate him. Emmi saving the baby highlights his parental feelings. However, through the whole event Emmi realizes that as a single parent, he alone would never be able to financially afford and take care of the baby to save him from people like Champa; he does not want the baby's future in such hands. He gets his family to help with an adoption, and he himself finally commits suicide. The intersex films constantly reflect this serious problem of both Asian and western socities where characters attempt suicide because of the societal behaviours and hatred, such as Ryan in OLM, Spork in Spork (2010) and Rebecca in Both. And in Darmiyaan Emmi chooses the same path for himself and Zeenat and surrenders his life.



Champa and her group prepare to castrate Emmi's baby to make him a eunuch.



Chitra agrees to adopt the baby on Emmi's request.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Tamanna (dir: Mahesh Bhatt, 1998)

After *Sadak*, Pooja and Mahesh Bhatt worked together on another drama film, *Tamanna*, with a positive intersex character, Tikku Ali Syed (Paresh Rawal), based on a real story. Tikku's mother, Nazneen Begum, was a film actress and Tikku worked as a makeup artist. *Tamanna* has many similarities with *Darmiyaan*: both films are set in past years, both depict Muslim intersex characters, both have plots about film actress mothers who lose their reason in hard times after the peak periods of their careers are over, and both intersex protagonists work in the film business and adopt an abandoned child after a tragic event in their lives. Emmi in *Darmiyaan* commits suicide after all his attempts to do something for his mother and child, because he never had a friend to share his sorrows. In contrast, Tikku is lucky enough to have a lifelong friend Saleem (Manoj Bajpayee) who keeps him going in good and bad times.





Tikku cries at his mother's funeral.

Mentally ill, Tikku's mother was an actress but now acts only at home.





Koshalya leaves the baby on garbage to die on the orders of the father and her master Ranveer Chopra.

Saleem asks Tikku to take the baby to the police.



Tikku, who hid his gender identity from Tamanna, gets shocked while in female attire, when he sees Tamanna in front of him unexpected.

Many scholars, as I mentioned before, conflate intersex with transgender, such as Kaur (2017) [open references in new window] who believes that Tikku is a "transwoman" when the character is depicted an intersex person born with a variation of sex characteristics; in fact, in the film it is not explained what intersex trait Tikku had at the time of birth. In addition, Kaur (2017) uses the term eunuchs for Shabnam in *Shabnam Mausi* and Munnibai in *Welcome to Sajjanpur* when they both are intersex characters and they have not been castrated in each film.

Tikku picks up an abandoned child from the outside garbage area but notices the woman Koshalya (Sulabha Deshpande), who left the baby there to die, leaving in a car. His friend Saleem tells Tikku to take the baby to the police. Otherwise, they



Tamanna gets mad to find out that Tikku is intersex and not her real father.

would think he had kidnapped the baby because he cannot have a biological child. Here again the dialogue incorporates a common social assumption that the intersex cannot have their own children.

Tikku's endeavour to bring up Tamanna (baby girl) by himself without having enough money, a place to live, or earning opportunities takes him on a coarse path where he sleeps on the street. Similar to Saima's case in film *Murad* (2003), Tikku has to send Tamanna to a boarding school fearing that she might find out the truth that he is an intersex and not her biological father. After he is fired from his makeup job in the film industry, he ultimately has to join a group of intersex and trans people for dancing assignments to pay for Tamanna's school fees and boarding expenses. However, Tikku unintentionally reveals his identity when Tamanna, who is a young woman now, pays a surprise visit home for the first time in years since she left for school. He comes in wearing women's attire from his dancing work and tells Sajid the details of how much he earned, not knowing that Tamanna is hiding there. His words cause her affliction and anguish. Similarly in the film *OLM*, Sam hides from Darren that she is intersex to avoid provoking Darren to leave.

Tikku faces hatred with Tamanna's reaction when she learns that he is not her father nor even a (typical) male and that in fact, he is an intersex person. Tikku reminds her that it is not his fault to be born this way [as an intersex]. The films I describe here deal with situations when either parent hides information from intersex children or do not share that they themselves are intersex. Tamanna has to be reminded how she was left in the garbage area and what her destiny would have been if Tikku had not picked her up and brought her up as his own daughter.



Tikku hides in the studio unable to face Tamanna.



Saleem tells Tamanna how Tikku picked her up from garbage and brought her up as his own child..

Tikku even sells everything including his mum's jewellery and clothes for Tamanna's studies. His character development highlights how vulnerable these individuals are, even as a parent, and how they are exploited socially or sometimes by their own families. Film directors have shown the same type of attitudes exist in eastern and western societies towards intersex people. In India, these films repeatedly highlight the struggle of intersex parents who face challenges from their adopted children such as Sam in *OLM*, Saima in *Murad* and Tikku in *Tamanna*.

In addition, the more visible issue of female infanticide in India has been raised through *Tamanna*. Not only do lower class or poor families kill their girls; it is a matter of shame for rich families to have girls be heirs. Tamanna's father, Ranveer Chopra (Kamal Chopra), is a rich and educated but corrupt politician and businessman. He and his old arrogant mother (Zohra Sehgal) are responsible for the killing of her two older sisters and Tamanna's disposal at birth. The grandmother then throws a gold necklace towards her servant, Koshalya, upon her return, for putting the baby (Tamanna) in the garbage thinking that the baby would have been killed by now. This plotline emphasises that women are as guilty



Ranveer's mother sympathizes with him on the birth of a girl.



Ranvir chastises his wife for bearing a girl again.

as men in killing the female infants for their prejudiced succession (*parampara*) in the family lineage. Also in the film, Ranveer taunts his wife Geeta (Abha Ranjan) for having a womb full of rubbish and lies that she has given birth to a dead baby girl for the third time. He blames her for producing shame for his family who has only had boys in the last 70 years. He threatens her to marry another woman if this happens again.

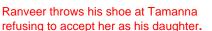
Pooja Bhatt as a young female producer was 24 at the time of production. She focuses on many women-related issues and reminds us of one of the reasons she made this film:

"the pressure of the mother-in-law and the family on the daughter-inlaw to produce a male heir should stop immediately" (Bhatt, 2018).

Tamanna's story raises serious questions about the position of women in general in Indian society. For example, Sonal Vij (2021) states,

"dowry is now illegal [in the Indian Penal Code], but it's practised in the form of expensive gifts to the grooms. Therefore, many girls are killed at the time of birth. Revealing the gender in advance to the parents is also illegal."







Tamanna falls on the ground when gets hit with a shoe.

The film also explores deep-rooted patriarchal behaviours, in particular the attitude that a woman is for sexual pleasure and producing children. **Ranveer** refuses to accept the fact that Tamanna is his daughter, and he throws a shoe on her face when she meets him outside his house and questions why he tried to kill her as a baby. He even hires a criminal to murder Tamanna to avoid this truth being revealed. He kicks his wife when she asks about Tamanna. The desperate Tamanna attempts suicide after her encounter with her father. The whole film questions the practices of discrimination against women and intersex people.

Commercially, taboo subjects in India are mostly brought to the screen in art films. Such productions have fewer conventionally attractive commercial elements and are unable to find large-scale funding. As Pooja states,

"it's not the usual commercial masala for it's got probably four action scenes and six songs [...] not a love story of boy and girl, it's a love story of father and daughter" but she believes it "is a relevant film made in the commercial mould" (Bhatt, 2018).

Intersex-oriented films have always been under the pressure of finding both funding and an audience. The need for commercially appealing elements is not only due to the makers' seeking good financial returns but also they want to gain maximum exposure and capture a large audience to address this topic. India is a



Tamanna sets herself on fire to commit suicide after being mistreated by her father.



Tikku saves Tamanna from Ranveer killing her.



Shabnam Mausi is based on the life of Shabnum Bano, an intersex, ex-MP of India (1998 to 2003). Here she is during an interviewr.

nation of millions and Pooja said she was "not interested in making an art film that 40 out of 200 people will watch," she "want[s] a film like *Tammana* to reach out to all those millions" (Bhatt, 2018). In fact, the film won the 'National Film Award (India) for Best Film' 1998 on 'Other Social Issues.'

Shabnam Mausi (dir: Yogesh Bharadwaj, 2005)

The film is based on the life of Shabnam Bano who is the first intersex Indian to be elected for public office as a member of the Madhya Pradesh State Legislative Assembly (MLA) from 1998 to 2003. In the Hindi language title, Mausi means Aunty. In 1994, intersex and transgender citizens of India were granted voting rights. Shabnam Bano (2017) stated in an interview, "today our India has gone 20 years back, there is poverty and unemployment" and "Modi's government is taking care of Indian men and women, they should pay attention towards intersex people as well." BBC (2000) mentions her as a eunuch when she was born an intersex, and also states that

"[t]here are no official estimates of India's eunuch [including intersex and transgender] population, but they are said to number nearly 500,000" (BBC, 2000).

Bhandari (2018) writes that intersex people are

"treated as outsiders and to add insult to injury their acceptance is denied by their parents and so the child faces exclusion even at home."

This melodramatic action film, *Shabnum Mausi*, is a vivid example of Bhandari's words. Shabnum is born to a police officer father and his wife, but she is taken away by a group of intersex and transgender people when they come to her house to celebrate the birth of a boy. They check her genitals and find out that she is intersex and take her with them without her father stopping them. The guru (in charge) of the group gives the responsibility of bringing up the baby to another intersex woman, Halima, who becomes Shabnum's mother.



Intersex and trans group visit Shabnum's house to celebrate her birth.





Intersex and trans group take the baby from the father to give him blessings.





Intersex and transwomen are married to god's idol in a temple.



God's idol, the husband of intersex and transwomen.



Upon reaching adulthood, Shabnum and some others from the group are taken to a temple and married off to the idol of a god. The guru, who now trades in the sex business, tries to prostitute Shabnum but is confronted by Halima. Guru kills Halima and accuses Shabnum of the murder; the youth is arrested. Shabnum escapes police custody and ends up in a remote village where she makes a place for herself by helping and fighting for local residents, who finally elect her from their constituency as their representative in the parliament.

The film starts with showing the activities of intersex and transgender people singing and dancing and begging on the roads and in congested public places. In this way the director symbolically indicates his theme. A nurse brings a new-born baby to a father who is a police officer and tells him that the child is healthy. She does not reveal the sex of the baby but seems in a hurry. Shabnam Mausi demonstrates the fear of a criminal custom: that without getting parents' consent, some transgender and intersex groups, as in Darmiyaan, consider it their divine right to adopt all intersex babies. The film accentuates the worry that no law applies to these groups, by positing that a policeman himself is helpless when his child is taken away in front of him from his own house. In fact, it's misleading information that the film is delivering to the audience. There is no law or community compulsion that parents must obey this like this. TTPA (2019) states

"no child shall be separated from parents or immediate family on the ground of being a transgender [and intersex], except on an order of a competent court, in the interest of such child."

In addition, no surgical intervention was shown in *Shabnam Mausi*. And the acting and body language of both parents is exaggerated and an example of



Shabnum's mother cries after her baby is taken by intersex and trans group and policeman father does nothing to stop them.

(hyperbolic) melodrama, which "always has the ability to provoke strong emotions in audiences, from tears of sorrow and identification to derisive laughter" (Mercer and Shingler, 2004). This aspect of the plot is far away from reality.

Hinchy (2019) sheds light on the history of the acceptance of hijras (intersex and transgenders) in India stating,

"[f]rom the 1850s, colonial officials and middle-class Indians increasingly expressed moral outrage at Hijras' feminine gender expression, sexuality, bodies, and public performances. To the British, Hijras were an ungovernable population that posed a danger to colonial rule."

Intersex people are not easily accepted as love partners in society, especially in spousal relationships, although many people use them in prostitution. During a sequence in *Shabnam Mausi*, an Indian king brings an intersex woman, Lolo (Vivek Shauq) in bridal dress, to his palace where she sees some other women throwing petals. Upon asking, the king replies that they are his queen. Lolo asks who she is then to him; he replies that she is his servant. Later Lolo is pacified by Shabnam who impels her to accept the reality that they are intersex and learning to live with it will ease their grief.

On the other hand, Shabnum herself goes through the same experience of rejection. A shopkeeper Iqbal has a sister Najma who threatens to commit suicide if he even thinks of marrying Shabnum; she tells Shabnum to leave her brother alone. The film posits what happens to the families involved; they find it extremely problematic and bothersome to accept intersex individuals in a love relation or as a life partner for their sons and daughters (binary people). In another film, *OLM*, an intersex woman, Sam, also faces the same reaction from her love's parents.



King brings Lolo to his palace and tells her she is the servant of all his queens.



Shabnum empathizes Lolo and encourages her to accept the fact that they are intersex.



Najma tells Shabnum to stay away from getting into a love relationship with her brother Iqbal.



The technical inaccuracies with some untidy and improperly framed shots have become a reason for less impactful scenes such as the long shot of Shabnum and Iqbal, in this image, has strong content with an empty frame.



Shabnam Mausi's plotline focuses on how workplace discrimination is a major issue for intersex people in South Asian countries. Shabnum is refused work in a government office; an official scoffs, has she ever seen 'Hijras working in an

Government officer insults Shabnum for daring to ask for a job being an intersex.



The truck driver having sex with a trans/intersex person shown through expressions.



Shabnum defeats Lalla in a fight.

office?' She is thrown out of the office. In the dialogue Shabnum is given the chance to raise questions about living as an intersex. Why aren't intersex people given the opportunity of getting a good education and joining respectable professions when they are given birth by the same society of men and women. She says that infertile men and women are not boycotted as are intersex people who cannot give birth. She asks if intersex individuals are sometimes seen as somewhat magical and can give blessings to binary people, then why can't they work in jobs like postal carriers? Why forced to beg? Shabnum's questions remain unanswered as no one has any valid answers.

The film demonstrates that lack of earning opportunities sometime lead to the intersex and trans poeple go astray from their communities' principles, and while prostitution is forbidden in the group, some discreetly do it (in the film). The Guru of the group herself is involved in running the business and persuades or forces some of the group members secretly. She tries to lure Shabnum into prostitution with the amount of money the young woman can get for her body but gets rejected. Shabnum threatens the Guru that she will go public about this in the community. Although, the film does not have any nude scenes, it does show the prostitution act symbolically through one character's facial expressions and body language; such a depiction highlights the agony of what many of them have to go through.

The treatement of intersex and trans people is sometimes accentuated by the physical torture they have to experience. For example, as Dave (2020) states, intersex and transgender people face "brutal and public violence, even in police stations." The film shows this with Shabnum: when Guru kills Halima but accuses Shabnum for the murder, Shabnum gets arrested. Since she is the only adopted child of Halima, the police take Shabnum to the funeral to conduct the rituals. There Halima's funeral,, an unrealistic situation, horror sound effects and loud music and strange lighting at create a bizarre impact and add to the high drama. Shabnum is tortured badly by the police when she denies the killing.



Guru puts the blame on Shabnum after killing Halima herself.



Halima is buried in her backyard.

Public humaliation was also shown in *Murad* but in the above scene there is an added factor of showing intersex people having extra ordinary bodily strength. Besides undergoing severe torture, when the police officer is sweating and tired of beating her, Shabnum is still stiff and shows no signs of pain. This element of heroic endurance is similar in Indian and Western films. But the Indian films are more exaggerated; even after so much beating, Shabnum has the audacity to flee from police and start a public life soon after. Patcy N. (2005) observes that "when the story shifts to Madhya Pradesh, it starts dragging" and does not "appeal to the common man." Nevertheless, in this part of the story, the film shows Shabnum's character as a strong personality.

While presenting some intersex characters living openly in public, some films portray intersex to be very helpful for the people around them; in response sometimes they only get hatred in return but, in contrast, may even be loved unconditionally. In *Moorat, where* Reshma (Abid Ali) rushes a child to hospital after an accident and gives her blood to save his life, instead of being thankful, the



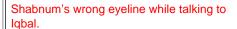
Abid Ali as Reshma in Moorat.

boy's father curses Reshma for giving him her dirty blood. In contrast, while when Shabnum fights to save a lower-class girl Naina (Rashami Desai) from being raped by the goons of a corrupt politician Ratan (whose son loves the girl), she earns a good reputation in the village.

Shabnum's self-composure and brave personality gains her respect. However, the professional jealousy of one of Ratan's subordinates brings him to Shabnum's door asking her to run for the MP (membership of the Parliament of India) election against Ratan. Ratan tries his best to force Shabnum to withdraw by many violent schemes, but the whole village supports Shabnum, and she wins the election against Ratan becoming an MP. The plotline emphasizes her generosity and helpfulness for society despite all hatred she has received. Furthermore, the film gives a strong message not only about the acceptance of intersex people in society but also the public's confidence to elect an intersex person to represent community in the Parliament. When Ratan ridicules Shabnum for winning election, taunting that townspeople have placed their future in the hands of a *hijra* (intersex), Shabnum questions him in reply: "What have you done for the people in the four terms you served?"

In spite of these qualities, regrettably the film is a low quality production. The acting of the protagonist Shabnum is sometimes very emotionless in the situations that she goes through, and the cinematography miscalculates with uneven shooting. These flaws hinder some great messages that the film wants to convey.







Iqbal expresses his love to Shabnum when she comes to buy something from his shop

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Welcome to Sajjanpur (dir: Shyam Benegal, 2008)

The film uses the device of "a play within a play." In the film is a novel, which the writer is selling to a publisher at the end. The writer himself is the protagonist and the book/film plot is based on the events that he notices himself in his village. In this way, the plot sheds light on many social issues resulting from lack of education, superstition, and prejudice. It takes place in a rural village where the literacy rate is very low, and people follow traditions and practices that are inhumane and senseless. The residents are poor and are still waiting for justice and basic human rights. An intersex person is one of the many characters who appear in the film. Social critique is carried out via a comedy action line that shows an intersex person Munnibai Mukhanni (Ravi Jhankal) running for election against a corrupt politician Ramsingh's (Yashpal Sharma) wife.





Ramsingh and his wife canvassing during election campaign.

Munnibai asks Mahadev to write a song for her election campaign

.

Munnibai is a supporting character, who appears for around 60 minutes in the movie, and has very few scenes. The main story revolves around Mahadev Kushwaha (Shreyas Talpade) who earns money from writing letters for the poor uneducated town's people. Munnibai asks Mahadev to write a few lines (lyrics) for her election campaign song, so she can dance and sing which would encourage the whole of Sajjanpur to vote for her. Dancing and singing are her strong skills because she and her group not only earn a living by using these skills but they develop good relations with villagers as well.

In response to Mahadev's question, "Who will support you: Brahman, Patel, Dalit, or Muslims?" Munnibai replies that everybody will support her as everyone is hers and she is everyone's. The dialogue is well written, commenting on many important issues in a comedic way. The lyrics of Munnibai's song comment not only on different genders like men and women; different stakeholders like temples, mosques and churches; and power politics like police officers and ministers, who have had their turns and now it's the turn of an intersex to rule. While all are singing and dancing, Ramsingh comes and threatens to kill them. Munnibai says that she only knows democracy and continues singing with the crowd.

Like Ratan's conspiracies in *Shabnam Mausi* to make the protagonist withdraw from the election, Munnibai is also being targeted by the conspirators by humiliating and ridiculing her in the public, calling her names, threatening violence and force. Ramsingh writes to the collector (civil administrative officer)



Ram Kumar talks to Subedar Singh proposing his widowed daughter in law.



Munnibai walks through the market.



Munnibai sings and dances in her election campaign.



Ramsingh orders Mahadev to write a letter to collector to revoke intersex candidate Munnibai's election nomination.

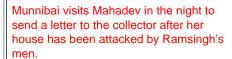
that they do not want an intersex mayor and to revoke Munnibai's nomination. He argues that it is a matter of respect for the town's people. Ramsingh taunts that if this intersex dancing begger wins, all the town's residents will have to dance [struggle for their work] and so will you (collector) yourself. The collector gets angry when he reads the letter.

In the media of many countries, intersex people are only taken as the source of jokes or horror, such as the U.S. film *Freaks* (1932) and U.S. TV drama *American Horror Story* (2014). For example, we may see intersex as an out-of-the-world creature, a seemingly half man and half woman, or a three-breasted woman. Such people are accepted happily in a circus but not respected enough to be involved in legislative decisions or to raise their voices to help fellow intersex and transgender people.

Through this plotline, the film itself raises the voice for equal rights for intersex people regardless of their sex characteristics and gender identity. Ramsingh and his men demolish Munnibai's house, leaving her homeless. Munnibai then visits Mahadev at night, crying and disheartened, asking him to write a letter to the collector complaining about Ramsingh. She dictates:

"In India, the time for change has come now. We, intersex people, are also humans, we are not aliens. We have earned a name in society through hard work."







Collector reads Ramsingh's letter

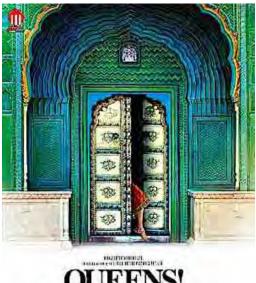
Ramsingh degrades Munnibai, stating that the intersex have no right to participate in the election. In return, Munnibai asks:

"Do we not have a heart, do we not feel pain, do we not get tears? Why are we so hated? We have been created by the same creator."

The collector orders police protection for Munnibai. Ramsingh's men then kill Munnibai after she wins the election, and her dead body is found by the river. At the conclusion of the film within the film, Mahadev reveals to the publisher that Munnibai was not killed in real life; instead she became a politician and is very active in the assembly. The film advocates for literacy, employment, and awareness about basic human rights especially in remote areas of the country.

Queens! Destiny of Dance (dir: David Atkins, 2011)

The Indian drama movie *Queens! Destiny of Dance (QDOD)* is a fantasy about a kingdom of intersex and transgender people and gives space for their life stories, internal politics, and societal problems. Along with a few fantasy events, this film presents some social realities and intersex issues.



Destiny of Dance

Queens! Destiny of Dance is the story of intersex and trans living as a community in a big palace.





Raghuvir as Amma, the Queen of the Kingdom.

Group of intersex and trans mourning on the roads.

In this film, Guru Amma (Mother Queen, played by Seema Biswas) is a rich intersex character, ruling as a mother queen of the kingdom where many eunuchs, transgender, and intersex people live together in her protection. As discussed above, while the eunuchs, transgenders and intersex living together as a community, they all follow the same rules and leadership. *Raani* (in English, princess) is a new term coined in this film given to transgender and intersex people to make them feel they all are important. Whatever they earn for a living they deposit into a collective fund at the palace. In the ordinary circumstances, as displayed in Shabnam Mausi, there runs a percentage system from the earnings of each person from the group. For employment, the kingdom has an organised computerised system of making records and printing daily job sheets so that every team consists of some intersex and transgender work under a team leader. Mukta (Vineethare) is an intersex character who came to Guru Amma 15 years ago when she was only 16. Mukta is a good dancer and is very dear to Amma and is expected to be her successor of the kingdom. Mukta says the kingdom (fantasy world) is,

"A world, away from this gender-biased society, is created for disregarded people like us. And this is where we get to live a life of love and respect with this motherly person."





Mukta cries that Nandani died due to her.

Mukta looks herself in mirror with dupatta.





Mukta stops her father from hitting her out of hatred for being born intersex .

Amma brings Mukta to the palace.

The film starts with a procession of interex and trans groups mourning as they go down a road, in a funeral later revealed to be for a murdered girl Nandani (Archana Gupta) from their kingdom. This is a way of the group expressing their grief on the death of a companion, mourning as do other ordinary human beings. In this case, Nandani was not an intersex character but had taken refuge in the kingdom without revealing any information about herself. Amma finds out after Nandani has lost her life that the young woman was her real niece. At the time, Nandani's arrival in the palace made Mukta jealous because she previously captured Guru Amma's attention and was a better dancer than Mukta. This jealousy leads to Mukta leaving Nandani with a man, Hakeem, for a dance performance but instead he tries to rape her and eventually kills her. Rape and sexual harrassment are social issues faced not only by women in India but also by intersex people who need to unite around this issue to get more serious attention from the authorities.

Another of the issues raised in the film is how families abandon intersex people due to being born intersex. In one scene, Mukta says "our biology is full of errors" and [in hindi: "na yahan na wahan,"] meaning, our bodies are not like the typical male or female. She further states, "that's why our geography also gets disturbed," which means that due to being born intersex they face problems with their families and get kicked out of their homes to live with fellow intersex and transgenders. TTPA (2019) states,

"every transgender [and intersex] person shall have a right to reside in the household where parents or immediate family members reside [...] in a non-discriminatory manner." [open references in new window]

Kaur (2017), however, notes something obvious about sex and gender oppression:

"[m]any people in India are afraid of talking openly about their gender identity and sexual orientation because of the fear of discrimination by the mainstream society."

In flashback scenes Guru Amma herself is shown living as Raghuvir, a male with short hair. Raghuvir's brother forces her to wear male clothes and live like a male, while she is later dressed up as a female with makeup and a scarf over her. Commonly, when they are young, if intersex people disagree with the family's wishes, they become a target of verbal and physical abuse. Although now TTPA (2019) allows transgender and intersex people to have "a right to self-perceived gender identity," as Dave (2020) states,

"[h]owever, it still requires trans [and intersex] people to undergo the long, demanding process of obtaining medical proof for their gender identities to be legally recognised."

In the film, various kinds of gender oppression occur together. For example, when Raghuvir's brother tries to hit her and his pregnant wife stops him, he hits her (wife) instead and warns Raghuvir to change her actions otherwise he will kill himself. Such a plot development indicates that intersex itself is a taboo subject in



Raghuvir's brother hits her for wearing female clothes and makeup.



Raghuvir consoles her sister-in-law on her husband's death.



Raghuvir is left alone after her brother dies.



Ryan and Stef in Only Love Matters.

India, and it is common that either intersex people themselves or their loved ones commit suicide due to shame. In another film, *OLM*, Stef tries to take her life because she is discriminated against for being the adopted daughter of an intersex mother. In this film, Raghuvir's brother commits suicide. Soon after, Raghuvir sheds her male identity and adopts the new identity of Guru Amma, when she inherits the big family house. Raghuvir, now Guru Amma, opens her doors for other people like her and welcomes intersex and transgender people with open arms. So, the 'Kingdom of Queens' is founded.

Mukta faces the same abuse as Raghuvir at her house. Her father blames her for being born intersex. Mukta confronts him stating that she was not born out of her choice and is of his blood, which aggravates her father who tries to slap her, but she resists it. The father also frequently uses abusive language with her, leading her to leave the house. She ends up arriving at the Kingdom of Queens where she finds the love she has been looking for all her life. Guru Amma says to Mukta,

"So what if we cannot produce kids... 'But if we could, I wish my child would be just like you."

It is yet another example of the assumed fertility issues faced by intersex people but also reflects on the unacceptability of some intersex persons within their families.

In search of love outside of their families, if intersex and transgenders in India and Pakistan have romantic relationships with binary people, the groups usually take this as their sexual exploitation when it can be a genuine love relationship. For example, in the film Murad (2003), the guru, Bobo forbids a younger intersex Naddo from going with men as she believes that they will only sexually abuse the young woman but will not ever give her respect. Another trans character in QDOD, Sapna, wants to go off with a man she loves. Amma asks Sapna if the younger woman has not already had enough insults from the world and reminds her that intersex and transgender people cannot be loved or love someone (that is, binary people). Contrarily, another film, OLM has a plot that speaks about intersex people having the right to love anyone they like, such as an intersex-male character Ryan (Matthew Wright-Kenny) loves Stef (Emma von Schreiber), and another intersex-woman character Sam (Sara Faraj) loves Darren (Josh Simpson); the love objects in this case, Stef and Darren, are both binary people.

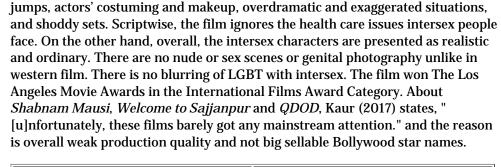
QDOD highlights how intersex and transgender people face derogatory terms and insulting behaviour and are not even considered human beings by some. In a government office, an officer calls Mukta's group *Chakkon*, which is a rude word for transgender and intersex people; a woman official there says that she thought only humans could visit that office. Mukta touches her hand to show that she is a human. This may be an overly obvious way to convey the message, but the film tries to comment on how binary genders' behaviour often denigrates intersex and gender minorities.

QDOD was released in 2011. It overtly displayed the need of intersex and transgender community to interact with intersex and trans people from other countries through social events and a wider exchange of information and awareness. This has started taking place in western countries recently where conferences and events are being arranged so that intersex scholars, activists and advocates from all around the world participate, exchange and learn new knowledge and socialise with each other.

Although the fantasy setup of *QDOD* is unique, there are several things that affect the film's quality including compromised actors' performances, shot continuity



Sam and Darren in Only Love Matters.





Mukta feels jealous of Nandani.



Mukta and her group meet with a government officer to get permission for an international intersex and trans event.



IInternational intersex group event is organised by Amma and her group members.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Bhanushanker Chowdary's *Ardhanari* has a disguised intersex character, Ardhanari.



Swami gives police officers clues about Ardhanari, an intersex serial killer.



Ardhanari's wife and baby being murdered.



Ardhanari (dir: Bhanushanker Chowdary, 2016)

From 2005 to 2010, the Telugu film industry, the second-largest film industry in India, produced more films (1439) than the number of Hindi films produced (1424) (Murthy, 2013). And as Kaur (2017) states,

"[i]n almost every Hindi film, either the trans [intersex] person is portrayed as a horrifying villain or in a comic way with offensive transphobic humour directed at them." [open references in new window]

The Telugu language movie *Ardhanari* uses the horror film genre. It features a male protagonist, a disguised intersex psycho serial killer with supernatural powers; he is named Ardhanari (Arjun Yajath), which means half woman. Viewers do not know till an hour into the film that the character is originally a male. He is in disguise to take revenge for his wife and son's murder. In fact, at the start of the film a Swami (spiritual leader) tells police officers who come to him that the serial killer is a "power" who is in the form of an intersex, not a male or a female.

Ardhanari appears on a train without a ticket, and her first prey is the ticket collector who tries to sexually assault her because of that violation. She chops off the head of her victim and hangs it behind a police car. Her other victims include a corrupt lawyer and his girlfriend whose corpses journalists discover later outside of the police station with a note blaming the police for the murders. Ardhanari then kidnaps the Chief Minister and forces him to eat grass until she kills him. She also kills the four police officers who approached the Swami by burying them alive in a deep ditch and chopping their heads. Ardhanari's barbaric murders present the intersex as a violent villainous character like Casey Kaufman in the film *Terror Firmer* (1999), who mutilates his victims' organs and pickles them in jars.

A female police officer, Anuradha, disguises herself as an auto-rickshaw driver to search for the murderer. At the same time, to authenticate herself while carrying on her own secret mission, Ardhanari joins a group of trans and intersex to live and work with them. Finally, Ardhanari is caught following a police chase. She is convicted of all the murders and given the death sentence. As her last wish, Ardhanari addresses the public in a live telecast session where politician Dharma is present (also because she said she wished to meet him). She declares that she is actually a male, Shiv Kumar. He (Ardhanari now Shiv Kumar) says he was always a patriot but because of his efforts to redress social wrongs, he was punished by the Chief Minister and other corrupt people who killed his wife and newborn son in front of him. Those more powerful convicted him of that murder, and when he could run away from police custody he sought to punish them. Finally, Shiv Kumar is hanged.

Though the protagonist only pretends to be intersex, the film does show the traditions in some of the intersex and trans groups. The group that Ardhanari joins ask her to prove that she is intersex and not a man. At that point, Ardhanari claps in a specific style that is used by the intersex people in South Asia. Then film displays the rituals of an intersex group adopting a new member, through the Haldi (turmeric) rubbing, milk shower and a combined pooja (worship).

Ardhanari forces CM to eat grass.



Ardhanari addresses public in live transmission.



IIntersex and trans group asks Ardhanari proof of being an intersex to join them.



Ardhanari is adopted by Intersex and trans group.



Shiv Kumar(Ardhanari) speaks to police officer.

However, we can ask what it means to use the horror genre. To have a protagonist disguising as an intersex to commit horrible murders indicates two things—either to show that intersex is taken as very unharmful in the society and no one can doubt they might kill some. Or else a horror film might project in a disguised way, rage: either rage and fear at sexual variation or the rage of the intersex themselves. The horror genre also allows the film to project the intersex as having supernatural powers (as mentioned by the Swami) or having extra ordinary strength of both male and females.

Ardhanari is another example of 'trash cinema' or 'exploitation cinema' like Terror Firmer (1999) associating intersex as a taboo and trash thing. Independent filmmakers are pioneers of exploitation cinema, who

"were out to 'make a buck' and most could not have cared less whether their films were technically or artistically good" (Esper and Weiner, 2010, p41).

Ardhanari has a weak script, many unnecessary boring scenes, and some scenes that do not make sense such as Kumar beating government employees for not doing their duties and teaching lessons about obeying the law. In scenes set in prison, the film shows intersex people are kept with men instead of having a separate place or with women. Like Sadak, Darmiyaan, and Shabnam Mausi, Ardhanari also shows prostitution due to poverty and lack of job opportunities. The IndiaGlitz (2016) review rejects the film for the lack of realism. Its critic does not appreciate how intersex has been used in the film, stating,

"[t]he portions where the hero seeks his comeuppance as a transgender [intersex] should have had a mature drama. It would have evoked a sense of freshness for sure. But the same is not leveraged properly. Too much frivolity mars the proceedings."

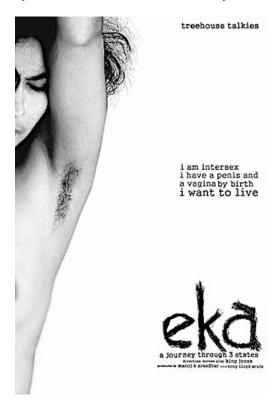
To develop an intersex character as a criminal and murderous tendencies is also shown in *Sadak* as discussed earlier. But except for these two films, other intersex protagonists in Indian cinema are generally positive such as Tikku, Shabnam Mausi, Emmi, Munnibai and Guru Amma. It is taking a risk to produce anything but positive images. In some ways, as well, the film points to a superstition that works in favour of the intersex in India; they may be valued and their curse avoided, with people thinking they are near to God.

Eka (dir: Prince John aka King Jones, 2018)

Eka is a Malayalam language low budget independent movie. Malayalam cinema is non-Bombay-based film industry in the state of Kerala, in one of the important South Indian languages. (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam are referred to as "South Indian cinema.") These films "began to be produced in significant numbers from the 1950s" (Joseph, 2017). South Indian films have a wide viewership all over India and some are dubbed in Hindi for the non-native speakers.

Prince John (aka King Jones) has written and directed *Eka*, and it is his debut film but is "banned in home country" (FilmFreeway, 2018). The reasons for banning the film were the nudity and the violence in the film. To include real-life experience, John disguised himself as a transgender person and appeared on the streets.

"When the real notes from society became a film script, the movie became extremely violent, many of the audience left the theatre at the



Official *Eka* poster. *Eka* was presented as all 'about body politics' through posters like this armpit hair giving a wrong concept about intersex people.



Eka and Lails's traveling long shot.



Eka and Laila go on bikes for their road trip.

premiere show, some of them fainted at the hall and the show was interrupted (FilmFreeway, 2018).

John states about the censorship that the [t]railer of the movie was mass reported on YouTube and was removed many times (FilmFreeway, 2018). Hence, the film is not publicly available to watch and a detailed narrative and textual analysis is not possible. I write the analysis on the basis of the data collected from published sources about the story, the production events and the interviews of the cast and crew.

Eka tells the story of an intersex woman, Eka Sindoori (Rehana Fathima). The other character, Laila (Anusha Paul) belongs to an orthodox background from Kerala and is now joining her daytime job in Bangalore. Laila is struggling to find a space to live as she was blamed for eating beef which many Hindus do not like for religious reasons. Eka offers her house-sharing, and they slowly develop a connection based on understanding and their relationship turns romantic. Laila learns that Eka is an intersex person and through her, she meets non-binary groups. Eka and Laila decide to go on a bike journey through three Indian states, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. They attend queer pride march and together enjoy their experiences and freedom.

The film claims to be the "first Indian movie on the intersex community" and John states that intersex "is a taboo subject and many are still on denial mode about it" (Mohandas, 2017). I cannot claim if the corrective surgeries have been discussed in the film at any point, due to not much data available about the film; however, John raises his voice against the corrective surgeries stating, "one out of every 10,000 children are born as intersex. But most of them are subjected to corrective surgeries right away" (Dinesh, 2017). This indicates that awareness about the surgeries among film professionals has started to take place and the filmmakers are trying to highlight these practices through films.

John also discusses in his interview how intersex people have fears about publicly revealing their intersex identity. He states, "fearing isolation, they [intersex people] refuse to come out and live in agony. In Kerala alone, only three have declared their identity as intersexuals" (Mohandas, 2017). In the film, although Eka is a bold character, she reveals her identity in public but not at her workplace due to fears of being discriminated against. These fears lead to psychological problems.

As the society has very less acceptance for intersex people, they are forced to grow up and appear as one of the binary genders. Many intersex people try to commit suicide because of wrongly assigned and forced genders during medical procedures, such as Ryan in *OLM* and Rebecca in *Both*, as discussed above. They are being deprived of their right to choose their own identity. These practices should stop and medical interventions delayed until these intersex children are able to decide if and when they need it. Many intersex organisations and advocates such as Pidgeon Pagonis and Sean Saifa Wall are raising awareness about these issues.

In favour of intersex people's human right to live as they want, *EKA*'s poster tagline reads: "I am intersex, I have a penis, and a vagina by birth, I want to live." *Eka* is the only Indian movie that clearly defines intersex variation of the protagonist. It reminds similar intersex variation character, Morgan in the American film *Both*, and Alex in Spanish film *XXY* (2007). Fathima states, "*Eka* is about body politics and the existence of intersex individuals in our society" (Soman, 2017).



Film *Eka* is banned in India due to nudity and lesbian elements.



Director Prince John while filming.

Most of the intersex and LGBT+ Western feature films have nudity and sex scenes. In India many people believe that these cannot be watched with their families. YOYO TV Malayalam (2017) reports that *EKA's* posters show "a topless woman, with her hands bound together and hairy armpits exposed," "blood trickling down the feet of a menstruating woman, and another depicting her naked lying on her back with a perfect reflection on the floor." These visuals of the posters can offend some intersex people especially when viewers decode the meaning of these nude images with the tagline "I want to live." Labelling intersex people with these sorts of words and using such images perhaps should be avoided when society has very little knowledge about intersex people and their problems.

Some can argue that each space is different—cultural, religious, personal, and social—and it depends on which space one wants to use. A medium includes film, television, online platforms such as YouTube, and time includes kids time, prime time, or late-night programs. *Eka* has nude scenes like U.S. movies with lead intersex characters, *Never Too Young to Die, Terror Firmer*, and *Both*. My own opinion is that nudity and sex have a specific audience but using this material may create hurdles to reach the maximum number of viewers when it comes to creating awareness about a subject that is still considered taboo in society.

In a traditional setting like India, the censor board nevertheless has much more lenient rules now than a few decades back. However, *Eka* falls under censorship because it has stark naked characters, like *Bandit Queen* (1994), and has been banned in India; the legal case is in the Indian supreme court. In my research, I contacted filmmakers multiple times but they are reluctant to share any more information about the film or to share the complete story. John trusts that "[r]egardless of what the industry and the regulatory bodies believe, the people are much more receptive to themes like this. I am making the kind of films I've been wanting to see on screen," and Dinesh (2017) further adds that John "ascertains that he will not allow the movie to be censored."

Also it is not easy for the actors to act nude as they are then reprimanded by society and especially in religious circles. In addition, the production circumstances were difficult for the actors to deal with. For example, Fathima was initially not comfortable being nude on the set "in hard conditions like a mortuary" when John was taking a long "time to shoot with even twenty takes [...] she accused that, it's easy for the crew because they are in clothes" (FilmFreeway, 2018). As Fathima states,

"[t]he scenes were not easy, and the director has a habit of going for 20-25 takes. I was nervous. 'Are you conscious of being naked?' the director asked me. 'Yes,' was my answer" (Mynation, 2018).

John asked all 18 crew members to remove their clothes including the cameraman, assistant directors, light staff, production staff including the producers; everyone became nude for the actress. *Eka* also distributed a poster of the naked film production team.



John states.

"[n]udity also means innocence [...] Only the ones with the purest of hearts can be naked. Everyone had to work without any clothes. There was no gender bias there" (Mynation, 2018).

This is an extreme version of his achieving his goal as a director but a breach of crew members' personal space and rights.

Fathima also argues that

"[s]eeing an individual on the basis of just gender as male or female is something that needs to be changed. *Eka* is a film that questions the general concept that celebrates a male body but at the same time sees the women's body as obscene" (Fathima, 2017).

All this debate seems to me more about men vs women, and it may not directly relate to intersex people; but these problems in the film's production are useful to explore since they show the position of women and minority genders and sexualities in Indian society.

When *Eka* depicts a long kiss between two lesbian women, it may give an impression that there is a bluring of the intersex subject with that of LGBT, which is common in some western films and television dramas. Some people in the audience may misunderstand intersex to be an aspect of LGBT, when issues of intersex people are medically, socially, and legally different from those of LGBT people. Some intersex individuals may identify under the LGBT+ umbrella but some may not. Prince John was "worried if people would accept it or not" and stated, "I don't want to see this film as only about LGBT or their struggles or revealing their private life, it's more to bring out a political message" (John, 2017). Through *Eka*, Prince John may be trying to create more awareness about intersex people but the plotline and visuals of the film make it difficult for him to achieve his objective. If a filmmaker is only concerned with artistic expression, they may also need to consider how they can spread their intended message to a wider audience.

Eka has been selected in a few comparatively new film festivals including Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival, China, Gender Reel film festival, US, and Benin



Fathima talking about Eka during an interview.



Eka and Laila kiss each other.

City Film Festival, Nigeria, but it is not confirmed if the film was screened and when it will be publicly available.

Conclusion

The Indian film industry has portrayed intersex sometimes with realistic characters, sometimes with exaggerated ones. The fiction films have built on the problems the intersex come across in daily life in the society including hatred and ridicule. These films have raised sensitive issues regarding the basic human rights and constant problems of intersex people—not getting a family life often since childhood, not getting enough work opportunities, not being aware of their bodies, being made to feel shame about their bodies. They are discriminated against in educational institutions, at work and by government officials; face physical and sexual violence, harassment, highly offensive and derogatory language; are forced to present themselves in society as a male or female; and discriminated against in their right to get love, care, and married.

At the same time, a villainous and freak concept of intersex has existed in Indian films. By casting male actors as most of the intersex characters, it can be argued that the Indian films have stereotyped intersex characters as bodily strong and manly figures. These films indicate as intersex those who have different body structures and are neither male nor female. And cinema usually neglects certain key issues. For example, films do not create awareness about what does it mean to be an intersex person nor do films discuss their sex variations or other medical issues including the non-consensual corrective surgeries. It can also be deduced from the analysis of the films here that the concept of intersex or people's ideas about it is contradictory among different groups in India. Some people think intersex people have valuable blessings and awful curses, while others believe that due to past sins, the intersex are reincarnated this way. The intersex often are not taken as "ordinary" human beings like people with binary genders are. With less or no nudity (except Eka, which is banned in India due to nudity and lesbian elements), and no blurring with LGBT, these films may effectively pass on strong messages of acceptance and speak for the equality of intersex people.

The filmmakers have tried to balance the representation of intersex by showing both negative and positive characters. There is still a need for the mainstream industry to pay some attention to intersex characters so that the films can reach a larger audience and help play a role in educating and creating awareness about intersex human rights and the problems that they encounter.

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Notes

1. Indus Telefilm Award-winning fiction television film *Murad* (2003) and a 32-part (Lux Style Award 2005, nominated) TV drama series *Moorat* (2004) on the subject of intersex and my research studies on intersex representations in US TV drama series (Qureshi, 2019), Indian cinema (Qureshi, 2020), Australian films vs TV (Qureshi, 2021a), in English language films (Qureshi, 2022a), and on the Transgender (intersex) person Act 2018 (Qureshi, 2022b) and my publicly available database the KQ Intersex Database (2021b). [return to page 1]

2. Kimberly Mascott Zieselman is an intersex woman and the former executive director of InterACT.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The opening shot of the film, before the titles appear, shows a giant compass prescribing a boundary around a woman.



Sheetal and her husband entering the one-room rented space on the terrace.



The camera zooms out till Sheetal and Sharan are captured in the same frame. Sharan wakes

Daaera: forbidden love and the sensorium of desire in Bombay cinema

by Sangeeta Gupta

My ideas here evolved when I revisited a lesser-known film of the famous Indian actress, Meena Kumari, feted as the tragedy queen of Bombay Cinema, especially during the 50s to the early 70s. The film, titled *Daaera*,[1] [open endnotes in new window] released in 1953, belongs to the black and white Social films of Bombay cinema. These films were broadly speaking, family melodramas with social themes. I remember my mother watching the replays of these films on television with great interest and emotional engagement. Watching *Daaera* so long after its release, during my research, was for me a rediscovery and a connection with the past. This intellectual reflection thus emerges from my personal as well as academic engagement with a film that remerged for me as a powerful expression of complex issues around conjugality, desire and sexuality.[2]

A cinematic framing of forbidden love

Daaera, directed by Kamal Amrohi, tells the story of a beautiful young woman, Sheetal (played by Meena Kumari),[3] who is married to a consumptive old man—old enough to be her father. The film is about a dark romance between her and the rich young man, Sharan, (Nasir Khan) who is their widowed landlady's son living in the aristocratic household across from her terrace. Since Sheetal is a married woman, this romance cannot have social sanction. However the visual and aural language of the film destabilizes neat patriarchal orthodoxies and articulates an erotic charge that draws the spectators into this sensorium of unfulfilled desires.

In the 19th century, the Indian public sphere was engaged in crucial debates around social reform and women, pertaining to issues like women's education, age of sexual consent, prohibition of child marriage, and prohibition of the practice of *sati*,[4] advocating widow remarriage among other solutions.[5] *Daaera* engages with some of these crucial debates in a direct as well as symbolic way and foregrounds the subjectivity of a young couple—of the woman who is trapped in a mismatched marriage and a young man who falls in love with her. The film brings to life the current social debates mentioned above, so that spectatorial engagement is not just at an intellectual level but at an affective, emotional level.

Sharan, the male protagonist, initially has the misunderstanding that Sheetal is the daughter of the sick old man whom his mother has recently accepted as a tenant. He is captivated by her beauty as she lies under a flowering tree on the terrace across from his own room, not realizing that she is actually the

up in the morning and looks in the direction of the terrace opposite his own.

wife of the old man. We understand his attraction for her chiefly through his transfixed gaze and the poems he composes and sings for her.

Interestingly Sheetal and Sharan do not ever meet each other nor exchange any dialogue. No shot-reverse-shot sequences signify their relationship with each other. Despite this, right from the start a connection between the two is established by the filmmaker, not through verbal exchange but through the affective charge of the audio-visual landscape. For example, very early in the film, the two of them are captured in the same frame, lying down on their respective beds on two separate terraces. With deep focus framing, Sharan is positioned closer to the camera and Sheetal is far into the background. She would have been missed by the spectators had it not been for the particular movement of the camera which initially focuses on her (but not in a close up) and gradually zooms out till both the protagonists are in the same frame.





The camera zooms out till Sheetal and Sharan are captured in the same frame. Sharan wakes up in the morning and looks in the direction of the terrace opposite his own.

He is surprised to see someone sleeping on the terrace opposite.

Another scene which brings this unspoken love into focus starts with the young man lighting a cigarette, blowing the smoke, casually looking in the direction of the terrace across, and becoming intrigued by the presence of a stranger lying there. He gets up, looks closely in her direction and is attracted by her presence. His transfixed expression, in close up, and a soft musical score in the background indicate the impact this woman has on him at first sight.

In the next scene Sharan is shown sitting inside a college examination center, with a blank paper in front of him, unable to write anything as his thoughts are fixed on the image of the woman on the terrace. This is shown by a superimposed image projected on the paper in front of him, again accompanied by the soft music. It is music which indicates the first stirrings of desire within Sharan—Sheetal remaining as much a mystery to us as she is to him at this moment. Sharan is unable to write anything on the answer sheet and finally the blank paper is taken away by the proctor.



Sharan leaving the house to appear for an examination.



Sharan seated in the horse cart.





Sharan lost in his thoughts in the exam.

Image of Sheetal lying under the flowering tree superimposed on the blank exam answer sheet.

Melodrama and evocation of the ineffable

The music transforms into a song in the next sequence, as Sharan is shown on the terrace listening to a song in a female voice. It is disjointed and asynchronous—we cannot trace it to any particular woman. Following the generic expectations accompanying Bombay cinema melodrama, we likely presume that the song is being sung by Sheetal; however, such expectations are belied as we realize that it is a devotional song being sung at a temple nearby. Although Sheetal does not do the singing, the camera draws us visually closer to her and her image becomes more discernable. As she lies under the tree, in a simple black sari with a faint light falling on her pillow, her image seems to elicit a strange mingling of pathos and lyricism.





Sharan looking in Sheetal's direction while a devotional song plays in the background.

A closer view of Sheetal—connoting pathos and lyricism.





Statues of Lord Krishna and his consort Radha.

Sharan listening to the song while looking at Sheetal.





The interior of the temple.

A huge plank being sawn by two carpenters in the space between the two terraces, accompanied by a harsh grating sound.

Instead of a further close up of Sheetal, we are taken inside the temple where the devotees are singing the devotional song dedicated to Lord Krishna while gazing at the idol of Krishna and his consort Radha. The song is sung from Radha's point of view, as she is imploring her beloved to protect her and hold her hand. [6] While the song plays in the background, for Sharan, who is incessantly gazing in the direction of Sheetal, the lyrics seem to hold an additional emotional charge. Sung in the hauntingly melodious voice of Mubarak Begum, accompanied by Mohammed Rafi and a chorus, the song creates a sensory impression which does not just connect Sheetal and Sharan but also pulls in the spectators into its emotional charge. This song then plays throughout the film as a refrain and becomes a narrative trope of desire.

"Thaam lo apni Radha ko Bhagwan Ruk na jaaye kahin dil ki dadhkan Ye na kehne lage koi birhan Moonh chhupaake saanwaria ne maara Devta tum ho mera sahara Maine thaama hai daaman tumhara"

"Take Radha in your shelter Lord Lest her heart stops beating And you be blamed for turning away As a lover forsakes his beloved Lord you are my anchor And I beseech you for your support."

Strangely intruding into the sequence, this melodious song and the beauty of the young enigmatic woman are emotionally undercut by a dissonant and incongruous image of a massive wooden plank being sawn by two carpenters in the space between the terraces. The juxtaposition of the song against the harsh disturbing sound of the sawing carries a disruptive foreboding.[7]

The film works at the level of such symbolism which also occurs in the verbal exchanges between the characters. The plank being sawed-off is one of the many symbols deployed in the film to articulate the underlying impact of occurrences in the lives of the main characters. This is because 'Love' is not a word spoken by any of the characters. As a result, most of the dialogue uses metaphorical language to convey emotional meanings, as will be shown in the analyses that follows.



Sharan's mother inquiring after his health as he has confined himself to his room on the terrace.





A devotional song plays in the background as Sharan looks in Sheetal's direction.

The mother follows his look.





She too notices Sheetal.

Understanding dawns on her.





She quietly walks away while Sharan continues to look in Sheetal's direction.

The mother asks the trusted family help to convey to Sharan how disturbed she is.

In once incident, Sharan's mother comes to visit him at his room on the terrace, and tells him that he is looking sick. She inquires why has he shut himself up in his room the whole day and why is he looking so listless. At that moment the devotional song plays again and Sharan looks in the direction of Sheetal, with the mother too following his gaze. As she slowly looks back at her son still gazing in the same direction, she understands what has happened to him and she walks away without saying a word, while her son is oblivious to her departure. There is no verbal exchange between the two but the song has also conveyed to the mother its erotic charge. She later sends her trusted servant to tell Sharan that she is deeply disturbed as well as ashamed. It is significant that the mother speaks these words while working on the spinning wheel or *charkha*.[8]

The messenger returns to tell the mother that Sharan replied, "Do not worry... even if all is consumed, the smoke from this fire will not be visible beyond the walls"—implying that his actions will not be the cause of any disrepute to the family. However, Sharan falls down from his terrace, later in the film, as he loses his balance while deeply lost in Sheetal's thoughts. At that point, we are shown a huge cloud of smoke going beyond the high walls of his aristocratic mansion, belying the metaphorical promise he had made to his mother.

Throughout the film, we encounter this kind of symbolic verbal as well as



A cloud of smoke.



Sheetal sending her marriage photograph and the letter stating that she is married.



Sharan hiding the image of Sheetal's husband.

visual vocabulary—whether it is the lyrics and melody of the songs, the instrumental background score, the lonely woman beneath the flowering tree, the plank been sawed-off into half, or the exchanges between various characters. This kind of multifaceted cinematic expression indicates a relationship that is dark and doomed and cannot even be articulated except in a cryptic form, if at all.

Coming back to Sharan, as he persistently looks in Sheetal's direction, he composes and sings songs of pain and anguish crying out to the beloved. Sheetal, however, *seems* to be unresponsive and indifferent; but we realize how deeply moved she had been when she tries to dissuade Sharan from pursuing her. At that point, she has her wedding photograph delivered to him. While Sharan pens down poems for her—the only words Sheetal is able to write for him are, "I am married."

The photograph is an evidential reminder of Sheetal's marital status; however, Sharan's fascination for her remains undeterred. He keeps her photograph under his pillow looking at it while covering the face of the groom in an attempt to obliterate the husband's existence. I wish to emphasize the difference in the way the two protagonists look at the same photograph—Sheetal look at it as if she's reliving the memory of a painful event in her life, one refuting any individual desire.

Sharan, on the other hand, in a mode of denial treats the photograph as almost the corporeal presence of the woman he has fallen in love with. Instead seeing it with a sense of shock and disappointment, as he obliterates the male with his palm, he gazes affectionately at the visible half of the photograph—happy in the thought of her proximity.

The chasm between the two terraces also has a deep symbolic significance for the two protagonists and the camera repeatedly emphasizes this distance by circular pans. At the same time, the camera also visually bridges the spatial distance.



Sharan composing a poem for Sheetal.



The paper crosses over to Sheeta's terrace as Sharan starts singing.



The shrill alarm clock disrupts the singing.



Sheetal unknowingly steps on the paper.





The paper refuses to leave her proximity.

The paper gets reaches the flowering tree.





The paper touches her feet.

Sheetal reading the poem and then letting it slip away from her hands.

For example, consider the movement of a fly-away paper on which Sharan is writing a poem. Seemingly animated by into corporeal life, this paper flies out in the direction of the opposite terrace, forging an aural and visual connection with the beloved. The paper follows Sheetal around till she reads it and recognizes the song that she has heard Sharan sing.

"Aa bhi ja meri dunia me koi nahi Bin tere kab talak yu hi ghabraye dil Aa mile teri najro se aisi najar Kuch na apni khabar ho na teri khabar Laakh dhundhu magar phir na paoon kahin Yoon mohhobat ke toofan me bah jaye dil"

"Come to me as my world is barren
And my heart knows no solace without you
Since my eyes have met yours
I am lost to the world
My heart cannot be saved
From drowning in the storm of love."

While the paper is following Sheetal around, Sharan is simultaneously singing the song —a desperate appeal to the beloved and an imploring to come to him and fill the void in his life. As Sheetal reads the poem she stoically disregards it; she realizes that the emotion it expresses has no role to play in her life. The paper, however, refuses to leave her proximity even when she tramples upon it; it defiantly flies upwards and gets stuck in the flowering tree under which Sheetal lies. The symbolic significance and affective charge of this song once again connects Sharan and Sheetal in probably the only way the two can be connected: "with a hyperbolization of desire via mise-en-scene." [9] The framing also makes the connection between the lead pair as the camera zooms in to a close up of Sheetal at the start and end of the song.

As Peter Brooks has argued in *The Melodramatic* Imagination that in "the speaking film," music "determines mode and meaning."[10]

"The emotional drama needs the desemanticised language of



Sheetal coughing

music, its evocation of the 'ineffable,' its tones and registers. Style, thematic structuring, modulations of tone and rhythm and voice—musical patterning in a metaphorical sense—are called upon to invest plot with some of the inexorability and necessity that in premodern literature derived from the substratum of myth." [11]

In *Daaera*, this expressivity is simultaneously offset: by the grating sound of the plank been sawed,[12] or the sound of Sheetal's coughing, or the harsh ring of the alarm clock kept near Sheetal's bed. These create a soundscape that works as a counterforce, disrupting the melodious songs and their soulful lyrics.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Reading a book whose self-reflexive title is

Sexuality and desire within the rhetoric of "sati"

I would now like to shift the focus to Sheetal's relationship with her husband and her role as a dutiful wife. Apart from replying to her husband with monosyllabic dutiful addresses like "Ji Swami" [13] [open endnotes in new window] ("Yes my Lord"), Sheetal remains withdrawn and forlorn. The time she has to herself when not attending to her sick husband is spent mostly in reading a book whose self-reflexive title is Daaera. The only person she befriends and talks to is her neighbor, Gomti, who is also introduced to us through a song she sings (Deep ke sang jalunmain, aag mein jaise jale baati).[14]

Gomti's song seems at first a background song also metaphorically vocalizing Sheetal's her pain and suffering—till the camera focuses towards the very end on Gomti singing.





The camera focuses on Gomti singing.

Sheetal and Gomti.

The song impels Sheetal to go toward Gomti, who tells Sheetal that this is her grandmother's house where she has been sent as a punishment for falling in love. The friendship between the neighbors develops into deep bonding as Gomti becomes a witness to Sheetal's deep suffering. The film uses this second story to presents a strong critique of patriarchal social norms that disregard women's desires—Gomti punished because she had experienced love but could not marry according to her choice; and Sheetal experiencing a marriage within which love would always elude her.

The other person Sheetal talks to is a kind doctor who comes to treat her husband. The husband dramatically implores the doctor to save his life. He says he doesn't want to die without having his health restored for at least one full day so that he can match up to his wife's youth. At this point, the doctor learns for the first time that the young girl is not the old man's daughter but actually his wife. The old man also talks of his helpless condition and informs the doctor of his ritual of consuming a potency medicine, <code>sankhiya,[15]</code> "devoured by a passion to live."





The doctor pays a visit.

Sheetal's husband imploring the doctor to help save his life.





Please restore my health for one day.

The doctor realizing that the young woman is the wife of the ailing old man.

The effort of speaking these words results in his coughing, making the wick of the close by earthen lamp flicker. Sheetal immediately prevents this by shielding the light with her saree pallu[16] in a gesture of wifely devotion and service. Head slightly bowed, eyes downcast, a stoic resignation surrounds this image which symbolizes her suffering and her silent resolve to fulfill her *dharma* (dutiful conduct according to the scriptures and social conventions). This gesture sets up a melodramatic *tableau* as Peter Brooks defines it:

"a resolution of meanings... where the characters' attitudes and gestures, compositionally arranged and frozen for a moment, give, like an illustrative painting, a visual summary of the emotional situation." [17]

Sheetal is trying to prevent the light of the lamp, (in this context, connoting her husband's life) from going out by her acts of service and passive obedience.

When the doctor leaves, Sheetal is asked by her husband to undo her plait and let her loosened hair fall on his face. He then erotically caresses her hair as they cover his face, addressing her as "*meri sati.*" Through this symbolic lovemaking, the important issue of physical intimacy and sexuality is addressed. The husband tells his wife that when he is under the loving shadow of her soft, silky hair he is able to defy death even if for a short while.



Gesture of wifely devotion.



Husband addressing her as "meri sati".



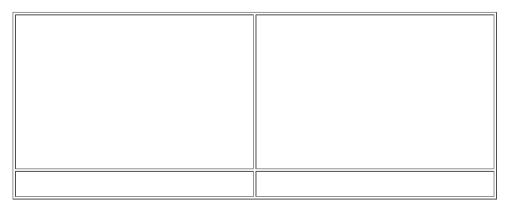
Covering his face with her hair.



The doctor telling Sheetal to care of her health as well.



Sheetal throwing away the medicine bottle.



This sequence also brings into focus patriarchal control over the woman's body, sexuality and desire, as we see the enactment of a symbolic *sati* by the wife. In spirit, the wife is shown to be ending her life along with her husband. Jyoti Atwal, a historian refers to this situation as the practice of a "living sati."[18] The doctor, in fact, is quick to understand this. He sees that Sheetal is deliberately sleeping in the open and keeping close to her husband as he coughs, not maintaining any precautionary distance. He asks her why she is bent on ending her life in this manner and attempts to help her by sending her restorative medicines which she secretly throws away, consumed by a death wish.

It is this life of a woman's patient suffering and her renunciation via a "living sati" that *Daaera* focuses on. Conforming to a conservative paradigm about gender roles, Sheetal performs her wifely duties according to the religious path of "dharma." It is not for nothing that the towering spire of the Temple is framing her terrace abode.

In an important conversation with the doctor she likens her husband to the sun and herself to the earth, saying that the earth cannot be saved without the sun.[19] In this way, she forsees the state of future widowhood as her husband is at the brink of dying with consumption. She is so scared of a life as a widow that she prefers death instead.[20] However the kind doctor reassures her that her husband's will to live is so strong, she needn't worry and should try to heal herself.

When Sheetal's husband addresses her as "sati," he is also reinforcing the meaning of sati as a wife who is chaste and devoted to her marital duty. He spells out Sheetal's victimhood to the doctor who is treating him, that the young woman is kamsin (young and innocent), abala (weak and dependent) and is his mazloom dharampatni (wronged and dutiful).[21]

Although much has been written on sati as the burning of the widow upon the husband's death, less has been understood about how this practice impacted all of marriage and how both society and individuals understood their place in it. Thus, Jyoti Atwal, notes in the introduction to her book titled *Real and Imagined Widows: Gender Relations in Colonial North India* that in India, "academically there remains a historical blank, since the discourse on widows' sexuality and cultural representations remains a neglected theme." [22] Furthermore, Anand A. Yang in his essay, "Whose Sati? Widow Burning in Early-Nineteenth Century India," makes a point about the invisibility of *satis...* no one knew them as human beings and as persons. Information on

widow immolation or *sati* is largely in the form of Colonial government records and statistics. Yang refers to Gayatri C. Spivak's argument in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice" that as one goes through the records of the East India Company, in the early 19th Century, "one never encounters the testimony of the women's voice consciousness." [23] And Yang has described the failings of this scholarship:

"In part, the particular emphases in the literature on sati reflect the predominant orientation of South Asian studies towards conventional political history rather than the 'new' social history... Another perspective, largely absent in the literature, is the focus of the human face of sati: neither the identities of those who committed sati, nor their reasons for seeking 'virtue in death' has received much attention." [24]

It is in the fictional world of short stories and novels that one encounters the subjectivities of the suffering widow. One of the reasons why *Daaera*, is such an important film is that it contributes in providing a human face to the suffering wife/widow thereby attempting to remove the blur and anonymity associated with lack of personal accounts of the lives of "dutiful" women. The film focuses on the injustice of a mis-matched marriage and is the story of several women who are forced into marrying older men, probably widowers, old enough to be their fathers. The young girls are socialized into believing strongly in their "dharma" or sense of duty towards their "swami"[25] and have to passively obey their husbands who act like their masters instead of companions. The film makes a strong appeal for companionate marriages and couple formation based on individual choice, desires and romantic love.

Jyoti Atwal looks at an important film in India's cinematic history, Mehboob Khan's iconic film *Mother India* (1957), which has the struggling widow (actually the wife of an absent husband who has abandoned his family) as the protagonist. Atwal argues that the mother/widow's "image captures the independent India struggling to achieve economic reforms and transform feudal social relations." [26] Atwal ties together the political and melodramatic theme as she analyzes the woman's role as a sacrificing mother who struggles to bring up her sons amidst dire poverty and later can sacrifice one of them to safeguard the moral universe that has been threatened by him. In contrast, *Daaera* does not focus on the woman as a mother or even as a householder involved in domestic chores. The woman is a suffering wife who has no hope or will to live and her only duty is to obey her husband's wishes.

Melodrama and the foregrounding of desire

Sheetal leads a life of stoic devotion silently enduring her destiny, but it is the power of melodrama that foregrounds the pain and suffering hidden behind that persona. As Ira Bhaskar rightly points out, "The ideology of feminine devotion is undermined, however, by Meena Kumari's tragic performance." [27] Her performance "works metaphorically to destabilize her assumed role, and indicates an internal turmoil that she cannot express or even fully acknowledge." [28] All her desires are symbolically transferred onto the beautiful flowering tree under which she always rests, and which she addresses as "meri sakhi" ("my friend"). Bhaskar writes,

"Thus the mise-en-scene, soaked with desire, figures forth a 'hysterical text' while its unrepresentable and unspeakable material has been siphoned off into the mise-en scene." [29]

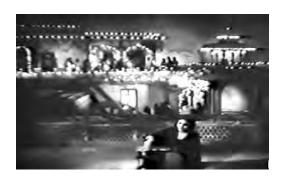
Bhaskar further elaborates how in the Indian context, melodrama does not



"Do not forget me my friend"-- Sheetal embracing the flowering tree.



Discourse on widow remarriage.



Sheetal lights a stove on her terrace.

usher in a process of "resacralization" that melodrama theorist Peter Brooks writes about in *The Melodramatic Imagination*. In fact "deployment of the Vaishnav Bhakti idiom evokes the continuum of the sacred in the everyday." [30] The devotional song with which the film starts and which also recurs as a kind of refrain throughout the film points to Radha's love for Krishna and conveys the erotic charge between Sheetal and Sharan. However both of them are trapped within "disciplinary regimes" [31] that deny fulfillment of these desires.

At one point in the film, it is reported that Sheetal's husband, who had gone to a meeting regarding his monthly pension, has died in a train accident. In terms of audience expectation, this news raises expectations that Sheetal might remarry if Sharan's mother, herself a widow, could be convinced to agree. Professor Kedarnath, a family member, (played by Nana Palsikar), undertakes this difficult task. The framing of his dialogue with the mother is carefully constructed—the mother is shown to be working on the *charkha*, averting a frontal gaze,[32] while Prof. Kedarnath is facing her, lecturing to her on the sanctity of widow remarriage, convincing her of accepting Sheetal as her daughter-in-law. Professor Kedarnath quotes from the Shastric text, *Parasharsmriti*,[33] enumerating the conditions under which widow remarriage can be allowed. Ultimately the mother is convinced, and she visits Sheetal. What could have resulted in a happy ending, however, is thwarted by the miraculous return of Sheetal's husband, again belying spectatorial expectation.

In the concluding sequence of the film, Sheetal lights a stove on her terrace to heat some water for her husband.[34] Steam arises from the water boiling, her metaphoric response to the neighbor Sharan getting married. Next, she retires for the night, lying down on her (death) bed while the terrace across is brimming with celebrations, lighting, song and dance. As viewers, we share Sheetal's perspective in this tragedy via the camera's gaze, since we, like her, can only listen to and view the song and dance performed as part of the wedding celebrations from a distance. Viewers usually expect to gain privileged access into a song and dance sequence even if it is denied to a particular character; but in this instance, the camera does not grant us this access. A dancing girl is performing on the other terrace but is barely visible; we can only watch from afar as we are visually and aurally positioned with Sheetal.

Once again, in deep focus diegetic space, we notice Meena Kumari's foregrounded face tilted towards Sharan's lit house with a palpable, insurmountable distance between the two. When Sharan comes back home with his bride, it is to the strains of the song "Dola utaaren kahar...". The lyrics speak about the bride coming to her new home in a palanquin and the bearers are asked to lower it so that the young bride can dismount. Sheetal, for the first time in the film, responds with a smile on her lips and a sneer in her eyes— the closest she has ever come to speak of her own unfulfilled desires and the self-knowledge that they shall never be fulfilled. Daaera has been about this journey from a barely discernable Sheetal to the extreme close up of her—she most comes to life as life is ebbing out of her.





Sheetal lying on her death bed.

The smile.





Spectators positioned with Sheetal's extreme close up, while the terrace across is brimming with celebrations, lighting, song and dance.

The film ends with the visual and the shrill sound of the alarm clock.

Through the mis-e-scene, the songs, expressions and camera angles, the film *Daaera* highlights the indirect yet charged exposition of love in the symbolic realm. Along with this, it also lends voice and subjectivity to the "sati", something that remains absent and impossible to capture in official administrative records.

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Notes

- 1. Translated as a 'sphere' and implying a sense of 'boundary.'
- 2. My academic engagement with the talkie films of Bombay cinema from 1930s to the early 60s is in the form of my research work as a PhD scholar at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal University, Delhi. I have been greatly inspired with the writings of my supervisor, Prof. Ira Bhaskar, who has written extensively on Social films. Her essay "Emotion, Subjectivity, and the Limits of Desire: Melodrama and Modernity in Bombay Cinema, 1940s-50s," has been the starting point of my thinking deeply about *Daaera*.
- 3. Kamal Amrohi, the director of this film, and Meena Kumari, playing the role of Sheetal, fell in love and got married in 1952—one year before the release of *Daaera*. This was their first film as husband and wife.
- 4. The practice of the wife being burnt alive with her deceased husband on his funeral pyre. According to orthodox Hindu religion, a widow was considered inauspicious. "Closely related to this idea was the belief that an unattached woman... constituted a grave danger to her community because of the supposedly irrepressible sexual powers she possessed, a capacity which always had the potential to disrupt her ritually prescribed life of austerity." Sarkar, Sumit, and Tanika Sarkar, eds. *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, Vol. 1. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011, p.29.
- 5. See Geraldine Forbes (2000, 2005), Sumit and Tanika Sarkar (2011), Sangari and Vaid (2013), Shekhar Bandopadhyay (2015), Radha Kumar (1993) for details.
- 6. The love between Radha and Krishna is symbolic of a deep companionship and a celestial union of the devotee and the Lord. The love between the two remains a sacred metaphor for heterosexual love in Vaishnav Bhakti tradition.
- 7. It symbolizes the separation and pain of the characters in love. *Daaera* was released a few years after the country had gained independence (in 1947)...but an independence which also partitioned the subcontinent into India and Pakistan and saw riots and bloodshed in the name of religion. I believe that the huge plank is a reminder not just of the forbidden desires but also of divisions which bind people in the name of class, caste, community, religion, or gender.
- 8. The *charkha* is the spinning wheel which was used by Gandhi as a potent symbol of colonial resistance and self- reliance during the *Sawdeshi* movement. Sharan's mother is shown mostly spending her time spinning at the charkha. In the context of the film it symbolizes the Gandhian ideals of prioritizing duty and service and sacrifice.
- 9. Bhaskar: 2012, 169.

- 10. Brooks: 1985, 14.
- 11. Ibid.
- 12. As has been mentioned in case of the first song also.
- 13. "Ji" is an honorific with which elders are respectfully addressed.
- 14. Translated as —"I burn with the lamp, as the wick burns in the flame" (2012: 170).
- 15. An ancient medicine presumed to cure impotency and restore sexual health.
- 16. The *pallu* is the free end of the Indian attire called saree which is actually a running material of approximately six yards in length—often decorated at the borders and pallu. Here Sheetal is wearing the plainest of sarees which denotes not just her renunciatory attitude but also the economic status of the couple.
- 17. Brooks: 1984, 48.
- 18. Atwal, Jyoti. *Real and Imagined Widows: Gender Relations in Colonial North India.* Delhi: Primus Books, 2016, p.232.
- 19. A similar philosophical explanation is given by Sheetal when Gomti begs her to at least articulate her pain, so that she might be able to lessen it.
- 20. Although Sharan's mother is also shown as a widow, the fact of being a rich widow, in charge of an aristocratic mansion and its accompanying standard of living, gives her a relative position of power. Sheetal's projected widowhood, in contrast, is a position of helplessness, vulnerability and uncertainty. In metaphorical terms, Sheetal compares it to the state of the earth in absence of the sun.
- 21. *Mazloom* meaning 'wronged' or victimized', *dharampatni* meaning dutiful and lawfully wedded wife.
- 22. Atwal, Jyoti. *Real and Imagined Widows: Gender Relations in Colonial North India*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2016, p.1.
- 23. Sarkar, Sumit, and Tanika Sarkar, "Introduction," eds. *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, Vol. 1. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011, p.23.
- 24. Ibid., p. 24. Tanika and Sumit Sarkar's two Volumes on *Women and Social Reform in India* have also attempted to give us personal testimonies on this issue. These volumes highlight the importance of oral history as an important historical archive, filling in the lacunae of official records.
- 25. Translated as "lord and master."
- 26. Atwal: 2016, p. 212.
- 27. Bhaskar: 2012, 170.
- 28. Ibid.
- 29. Ibid., 172.
- 30. Ibid.
- 31. Ibid.
- 32. One possible explanation for this averted gaze could be that though

Gandhi was not in favor of child marriage and supported the child widows' remarriage, there was ambivalence regarding widows who were older. Gandhi spoke of them as epitomizing the values of sacrifice and service and thus were to be venerated. In his words: "Self control has been carried by Hinduism to the greatest height and, in a widow's life, it reaches perfection.... I regard a widow's life as an ornament to Hinduism." Thus, he advised the widows to follow a life of "renunciation, sacrifice, self- abnegation and dedication to the service of her husband, his family and the country." (quoted by Atwal: 2016, 230-232). The *charkha*-spinning older widow with the averted gaze makes visible the continuum of conflict between tradition and modernity in this postcolonial moment.

- 33. Shastras are prescriptive religious texts that were referred to in conjugal issues, as marriage was considered a sacrament for the Hindus.
- 34. The first time she is shown doing it in full view, otherwise her kitchen activities remain invisible to the spectators.

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JUMP CUT

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Images from Dum Laga ke Haisha.



A physically mismatched couple drive the plot in the Bollywood film, *Dum Laga ke Haish*a.



Opening scene, showing Prem in his shop.



Early scene depicting Prem's love for music.



In cassette shop, Prem being scolded by his father



Hidden fat shaming in Dum Laga ke Haisha

by Diksha Mittal

A development in critical theory, fat studies is useful in media studies, and in particular I find its methodology necessary to critique neoliberal India's media landscape. My purpose is to expose the contradictions between a purportedly rising "fat-feminism" in India and yet a continuously awful treatment of Bollywood actresses and other women in India who are not thin. My work represents an attempt to fill some gaps in fat feminist studies in Indian media and culture. Here I ask a question about the social acceptance or not of fatness as related to one Bollywood film, *Dum Laga ke Haish*a (2015) that seems to be progressive in its use of an ample-figured actress. I textually examine the film's costume, color palette, camera movement and script to examine whether the performance of the fat actress Bhumi Pednekar (Sandhya) becomes an act of subversion against society's bias towards weight or if her character becomes victimized at the hands of the weight loss industry and media complex.

The film Dum Laga ke Haisha features a fat actress as a protagonist which is rare even today. In the beginning of the film, the character's confidence and carefree self-respect lead her to attempt to rebel against prevalent societal prejudices against fat female bodies. However, as the film progresses, I argue that these feminist attempts to reclaim a fat positive space are undercut. The film adds elements that allow it to meet narrow commercial expectations; it needs to perform well among a conservative Indian audience where women's thinness is still glorified. My goal here is to examine cinematic construction to see just how the character development and performance of the fat actress' body in one Bollywood film Dum Laga ke Haisha (2015) works to reinstate patriarchy and male voyeurism under the disguise of subverting normative gendered expectations. I am relying on textual analysis for understanding the actors' performance in the film. My conclusion is that while the film positions the central female protagonist as aggressive, it undercuts her fat activism by promoting traditional masculinity. And for this paper, I am using the word 'fat' as a neutral term free from bias to refer to women whose bodies do not fit into the culturally mediated standardized BMI standards.

The 'return' of the fat actress

Dum Laga ke Haisha is a low-budget film directed by Sharat Kataria, an Indian filmmaker. It was declared as a semi-hit by the box office with a total net gross of approximately 30 crores or 333 million U.S. dollars (Box Office India). [open bibliography page in new window] The Indian press received it quite well and hailed the entry of a fat lead actress, yet on deeper examination of the reviews, I found that almost none at that time critically engaged with the representation and portrayal of the fat actress Sandhya.

Prem's family members advising proper conduct, on the way to meet a suitor for marriage.



Stills introducing Prem as loner, deeply engrossed in his favorite music.



Close up of cassette playing a song of Prem's favorite singer, Kumar Sanu who was a nineties sensation in India.



Both families meeting in the temple before the arranged marriage.



Prem's aunt lying about his undergraduate degree to make an impression in front of the girl's family.



Small, mountainous town of Haridwar in India.

The post-2010 era in Bollywood cinema in India was characterized by the beginnings of representations of fat actresses in significant roles with substantial screen time. This 'return' came after almost two decades of imitating the Hollywood trend of featuring thin actresses as protagonists while relegating insignificant and unattractive roles to the fat actresses. The Bollywood movie *Dum Laga ke Haisha* is one such romantic comedy film that casts a fat actress—Bhumi Pednekar (Sandhya)—as a protagonist opposite a thin actor—Ayushmann Khurrana (Prem), who plays her husband.

In the film, Aayushmaan Khurrana plays a high school failure Prem who is forced to marry an obese young woman Sandhya, played by Bhumi Pednekar, who is portrayed as a bright school teacher. The plot is set in the 1990's, the beginnings of globalization of India which was then trickling down to small towns like Haridwar (a small mountainous town in India) that had a close-knit, patriarchal, joint-family system.

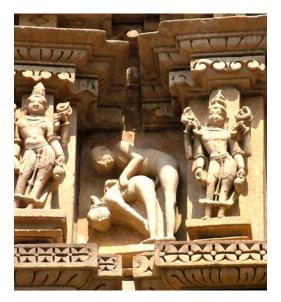
This rise of neoliberalism in India in 1991 tightened body standards for women's weight and imported the trend of fashionable slimness and body shaming of fat actresses. Historically, Indian culture celebrated curvaceous women. The special relation between women's weight and desirability, and Indian cultural history can still be seen in sculptures from past times. For example, the central Indian Khajuraho temples built in 10th and 11th Century A.D house curvaceous carvings of ancient Indian women deities and human beings. "Khajuraho: A Celebration of Cosmic Union" describes the erotic carvings of women in divine and human form who are "heavy breasted and broad-hipped, they pout and pose for the tourist camera for all the world like Bombay starlets." (Forbes)

Sucharita Sarkar in her essay explains the Indian historical association of fatness with prosperity. She refers to the title of her essay, "May My Children Always have Milk and Rice," which is an often expressed wish by Bengali parents that is borrowed from a popular eighteenth-century ballad. In the ballad, a poor boatman asks Hindu goddess Annapurna (goddess of bounty) to let her children have enough rice and milk for their meals. In this way food has been metaphorically used as a marker of health and prosperity in Indian culture from pre-colonial times. (Sarkar, 2008)

Extending this metaphor of prosperity to cinema, Hindi cinema in India largely featured fat actresses up to 1990's with complex roles and substantial screen time. For example, Indian media used to sexualizs and refer to Sridevi, a famous actress of the 1960s, with the sobriquet "thunder thighs." So then, film director Ram Gopal Verma, in his autobiography *Guns and Thighs* praised Sridevi's voluptuous beauty as "thundering thighs" in her role in the film *Himmatwala* (1983). (Verma)

However, the 1990's globalization of Indian media led to the "Hollywoodization" of Indian cinema including the entry of skinny women's body sizes as the ideal. Culturally, the 1990's was marked by the emergence of beauty queens, proliferation of gym culture, flourishing of cosmetic enterprises and circulation of Indian editions of international magazines like *Vogue*. Even Sridevi, much later, in the year 2013, looks much thinner on the cover of *Vogue* (August) edition in the article "50 going on 30? The Incredible Transformation of Sridevi."

The movie *Dum Laga ke Haisha* (2015) offers a reflection on the treatment of female fatness as ugly and inferior to thinness in the Indian society of the 1990's. The patterns of costuming and color, sound and camera suggest a fat bias towards the protagonist Sandhya while also subordinating her status and agency to her husband in spite of her higher educational qualifications and wisdom.



Khajuraho Temple carvings.



Prem ogling thin women while going to the movie.



Scene where both families meet each other for the first time in a temple, and Prem instantly dislikes Sandhya due to her weight.



First meeting of Sandhya and Prem where he instantly judges her for her fat size.

How globalization redefined beauty in India

In India, one of the ways beauty gets commodified is through Femina, a popular beauty magazine which is a major player in advertising beauty products and getting sponsors and advertisers for the Miss India contest. Vanita Reddy in "The Nationalization of the Global Indian Woman: Geographies of Beauty in Femina," writes that 'beauty' is more than a physical attribute; it is a "telos toward which the female subject, transformed into a consumer subject and essentially Indian, moves through these decades of globalization and national chauvinism." (Reddy, 2006) Femina constructs an ideal Indian woman's body in such a way that it is negotiated through different 'texts' (advertisements, billboards, social media, etc.) targeted towards middle-class Indian women who have the purchasing power and who can dream to climb up the social ladder by performing the "third shift of bodywork." Valerie Palmer-Mehta, and Sherianne Shuler (2017) in "Rising Against the Third Shift: Reclaiming the Postpartum Body in 'A Beautiful Body Project," define this "third shift of body work" which means that to add to the double burden of household chores and office work, women nowadays are expected to engage in the "third shift" of energizing bodywork or fitness or "reworking bodies to fit into idealized images of femininity" (360). Such ideas about bodywork are perpetrated to the middle class through media images of thin Bollywood actresses.

Considering this problem in more general terms, Camille Nurka (2014) in "Moderation, Reward, Entitlement: The "Obesity Epidemic" and the Gendered Body" writes that women invest in their bodies as a form of "cultural capital" and slender bodies are viewed as a sign of good womanhood, respectable femininity and as a repository of honor, culture and traditions. She states that attitude of abjectness towards a fat body is formulated in the public mind due to the "construction of the slender body visible as the object of (bourgeois masculine) national desire." Nurka argues that "slenderness, as an ascetic practice of moderation, grants the female subject a range of entitlements—to femininity, to the middle class, to national belonging—the reward for which is happiness."

Middle-class Indian women receive these 'incentives' for conforming to the prevalent beauty ideals in the form of job promotions, publicity and career boost. For example, popular Bollywood actresses who started out as middle-class commoners like Aishwarya Rai, Lara Dutta and Sushmita Sen got easy entry to the Bollywood by securing a position at the Miss India pageant and by eventually winning Miss Universe and Miss World titles. In this way, these media figures become aspirational models for women.

In contrast, middle class women who deviate from the thin body norm suffer not only on the desirability and career front, but also in their personal lives. They often experience tougher access to a getting a husband and children. This is apparent in the film where we see that Sandhya at her job interview not only received condescending remarks about her mismatched size with her thin husband, but also experienced constant humiliation from her husband and his family. In addition, she has scenes intended to produce disgust for her in the audience. For example, *Dum Laga ke Haisha* depicts the fat Sandhya bingeeating without any care in the world from a plate stacked with food. At the same time, we see the visible disgust of her thinner husband Prem. The screenwriters seem free to draw upon such a cultural disgust, which stems from popular, historical associations of the thin body with self-mastery and associations of fatness with gluttony that infiltrated into India through globalization.



First meeting scene where Sandhya blushes and likes Prem instantly.



Prem being dominated and forced by his father to marry Sandhya.



Trouble in marriage: The newly-married couple is upset with each other.





Sandhya at her job interview received condescending remarks about her mismatched size with her thin husband.

In this regard, Amy Farrell (2011) in her work Fat Shame writes about how fatness as a sign of person's financial prosperity and influence in the 19th century United States changed to be a metaphor of the threat of U.S. monopolies, unbridled capitalism, and political corruption linked to business interests. A common consensus grew in the country that though business growth is at the root of prosperity, unchecked business interest and excessive greed makes one fat, and representations of business greed were through images of fat rich people. One example of this association is given in the section "Hunger as Ideology" of Susan Bordo's work Unbearable Weight where she writes that upper class women in Victorian age had "conduct manuals" that taught elite women to refrain from "the dangers of indulgent and over-stimulating eating. Eating was supposed to be performed in a feminine way with "utmost precaution against unseemly show of desire."(112) This association of thinness with eating less later got imported into Indian media and culture through western media. For example, in the film's plot trajectory, the carefree, fat bride Sandhya who ate 'shamelessly' at her wedding with her plate full of food (to the disgust of her thin husband) ended up going on a diet towards the end of the film.

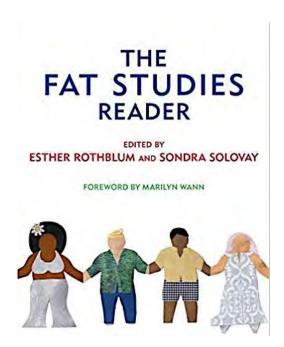
How colonialism introduced weight prejudice in India

In "How Colonialism Shaped Body Shaming," Livia Gershon (2019) borrows from the historian Christopher E. Forth, who argues that such weight-based prejudice in Asia and Africa was forged because of the colonial influence. For example, the British treated fatness as a widespread cultural trait without understanding the intricacies and variety of Indian body types. Forth writes that nineteenth-century European and American writings about Asian people were biased and generalized based on a few elite sections of society. For example, the British described the "rotundity" of the upper-Hindu Brahmins (who represent only a small proportion of Indian population) and ascribed it to the intake of "ghee" and laziness. Forth also gave the example of missionaries who selectively obsessed over Ganesha, a popular Hindu Deity with a round stomach as an accurate representation of common people's desires for similar form. In another example, missionaries also labeled Indians as "uncivilized" for their supposed desire for heavy women. These colonizers' writings created a scholarship which pitted the Western, thin female body as a superior in opposition to the Eastern, fat, inferior female body. Yet this did not impact women on a mass level in India unlike it did in England in Victorian times.

One reason for the relative impenetrability of the thin ideal in the colonial era is that the western, white woman was still looked upon as the "other" and impure by the Indian men who wanted to protect their women against external influence. Also, the foodscape in India had not changed and primarily consisted of Indiangrown crops. It was only after the implementation of 1991 economic liberalization policies in India, globalization of the media, the entry of diet-products and gym culture in the Indian market, combined with the entry of women in the public sphere that a fertile ground for infiltration of the western body size ideal was created.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The key text in Fat Studies: *The Fat Studies Reader.*

Images from Dum Laga ke Haisha.

Indian academic feminism and Fat Studies

Fat Studies arose out of gender and queer theory and identity politics and activist movements of the second half of the twentieth century in the United States. Fat studies is based on the premise that fat people are subjected to stigma in everyday life, and they suffer disadvantages in terms of social justice. This branch of cultural studies also creates a discourse that contests popular discourse surrounding an 'obesity epidemic,' where body size and weight are often linked to fitness and diseases. Fat Studies approaches challenge the medicalization of fatness and attempt to fill the distance created between science-based research and that kind of practice which demonizes fatness. In this way, the objectives of Fat Studies are to construct a narrative against viewing fatness as a disease and to critique representations of fatness in popular media. Currently *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sandra Solovay, (2009) [open bibliography page in new window] is one of the seminal texts in this area, and it is a collation of essays on different aspects of fat-based discrimination around the world.

I have found it useful to apply theories in *The Fat Studies Reader* to my subject, the film *Dum Laga ke Haisha*. Since Indian academia is characterized by sparse scholarship on fat studies and a relative silence on the returning trend of fat actresses in Bollywood cinema, I hope my research will contribute significantly to this scholarship about Indian popular media.

Fat studies in Indian academia is a slow offshoot of the rising fat feminist movement in Indian popular culture. Veena Majumdar (1994) in "Women's Studies and the Women's Movement in India: An Overview" writes that The First National Conference on Women in 1981 in Bombay received an overwhelming response. The mandate given by this conference led to the formation of Indian Association for Women's Studies. And the National Policy on Education finally accepted the demand of academic participants in the women's movement to reorient education to meet the needs of gender equality. Over the last two decades, Indian academia has been characterized by a growth in women's studies departments in universities and media- based research organizations and think tanks. New academic departments have been formed in women's studies and feminist studies and these inform research in new, private universities coming up in India like Ashoka University, Shiv Nadar University, etc. These universities are elitist in terms of infrastructure and fee and hire faculty who receive doctoral degrees from abroad. These faculty have started enriching debates on humanities and feminism from their education abroad. Therefore, there is a rising scholarship on body studies within sociology, gender, film and media departments. Academic engagement in India around fat studies is rising very slowly in the form of a few academic papers within sociology, gender, film and media departments. This is because of the influence of rising conversations about body weight and fatactivism in popular media that rose after the year 2010.

Dum Laga ke Haisha

Dum Laga ke Haisha was one of the first movies which started the above trend in India by presenting a storyline that promises to be fat-feminist and where at the end, the thin husband accepts the fat wife and learns to value her independent



Shopkeeper looks at Sandhya dismissively because of her size.



Prem is embarrassed to be seen publicly with Sandhya after their marriage due to her weight.



Public announcement of the annual Wife-Carrying Race in Haridwar (a fictional event) with the winning trophy.



Announcement of wife-carrying race.



Speaker announcing race to the town.

personality. However, on deeper textual analysis of the film content, I find that the film reveals deep biases against the wife's weight and her own sense of her self-worth is compromised due to her weight. This is also true of other early "fatactivist" films but for the purpose of this paper, I will stick to *Dum Laga ke Haisha*.

In the movie, the three elements—sound, costume and camera framing—interact with each other to create the social context of a small town of Haridwar during a time when Indian media and economy is undergoing a period of transition. Symptomatically, it depicts the beginnings of trends of treating female obesity as ugly and inferior to thinness; an exclusive connection between thinness and desirability had begun to take roots with globalization. This was driven by the percolation of western images, international beauty pageants and proliferation of gym culture into India, all of which reformulated the collective consensus about what is aesthetically beautiful in the eyes of a common Indian viewer.

This was also the time when the long established historical trend of viewing curvaceous actresses in cinema as attractive by the Indian public began to be replaced by appreciation of a presumed "size zero" that followed with the new popularity of beauty pageants in India. These economic and cultural forces altered the historical perspectives governing body image and the social value assigned to a body. Focusing on the media, Susan Bordo (2003) in her book Unbearable Weight has written about the "empire of images" in modern society pointing to the all-conquering quality of media with "no protective borders" which mediates the thinness message to the individuals (Bordo, 19). Media representation also imposes a disciplinary male gaze on women's bodies as women are forced to conform to the standardized norms imposed on them with a complete lack of agency. In this way, Susan Bordo talks about women's body as a "culturallymediated form" where its desirability is dependent upon their conformity to a prescribed size and to adherence to the traditional social roles relegated to them. In terms of the film I am discussing, the script uses the wife's fatness as an instrument to reconfirm the husband's male superiority, a plot development which becomes crucial to the couple's reconciliation at the end.

Secondly, the film absorbs a reflection of the inferior position of a fat wife in an Indian joint family system. The institution of marriage in India is governed by many compromises and communitarian factors that bind it too strongly. Separation is almost impossible even at the cost of an individual's preferences. The film takes up this interpersonal aspect of Indian marriage and its relation to fatphobia through the genre vehicle of melodrama. Linda Williams writes of three genres in which the spectacle of the body is caught in the grip of intense sensation expressed by the character on screen: horror, melodrama and pornography. She writes that melodrama can be much more excessive than pornography and horror in terms of displaying emotion. She states that we may be wrong in assuming that in excessive genres, "the bodies of spectators simply reproduce the sensations exhibited by bodies on the screen." In this regard, Williams gives the example of Italian critic Franco Moretti who has argued that spectators not only cry because of a character's suffering, but cry at the precise moment when "characters in the story catch up with and realize what the audience already knows." This is because at that exact moment, "desire is finally recognized as futile"...and pathos/ arises as a surrender to reality" and release of tension through tears "pays homage to the ideal that tried to wage war on it." (Williams 11)



Sequence of Song Fight with the domestic space organized to show separation through the window with rods, curtain and door.



Sandhya struggles to get through the narrow lane of Haridwar due to her weight.



Bedroom camera framing to look Sandhya more dominating than Prem.



Williams states that in fact, these genres represent problems of current cultures and subvert gender roles. Therefore, they should not be dismissed as simply sadistic or misogynistic. In considering *Dum Laga ke Haisha* as a melodrama, that moment of pathos and tears come when Sandhya hears a crucial conversation between her husband and his friends. Prem rants in frustration to his friends how his life has become miserable after being married to the fat Sandhya. This breaks the illusion of love and reveals to Sandhya the reality of her marriage which the audience already knew. She slaps him and he slaps her back in an intense scene meant to evoke agitation in the spectators. Further Sandhya leaves her marital home to go back to her parents' house and shouts at her mother when her mother coaxes her to patch up with her husband. Sandhya puts forward a tough, feminist stance in front of her mother but secretly breaks down into tears after locking herself in her room. This scene is not just a tearjerker but reveals how fat-feminist women like Sandhya also feel humiliated and rejected. They are made to feel helpless due to the weight bias prevalent in society.

Fat-shaming lyrics and language

Semantically, even the title "Dum Laga ke Haisha"has a fat-bias embedded in it. In Hindi, it translates to "channelizing all one's energy and force," suggesting the connotations of lifting a heavy weight. The background sound and the lyrics of the songs in the film constantly suggest a sexist and fat bias towards women. For instance, the wedding song sung in the movie openly uses lyrics that talk about the stereotypical preferences for a girl required for marriage. For instance, the lyrics describe the ideal girl as "sober, sweet, possessing "eyes like a golden fairy" with mastery over household chores. They also use words like "deluxe" and "extraordinary" to ironically refer to the fat bride for comic effect.

Also, the public announcement of the hypothetical annual wife- carrying obstacle race invented by the film in the town of Haridwar has the camera frame captures the announcer at a high angle. This makes him look as if he is speaking in an overarchingly domineering way using expressions like "the time has come to carry your personal load" to refer to wives. The public announcer also unapologetically says that "husbands are requested to flex their muscles while wives are requested to reduce their weight."

Moreover, there is an instance before the peak of the conflict in the film where the couple fights over playing their own choice of Hindi songs on the single tape-recorder in the house. The framing shows an interesting organization of space with iron rods, door, curtain between Prem and Sandhya to indicate the feeling of separation and divide between the couple. (Fig. 4) I translated their respective choice of songs that the couple played in quick succession of each other as a 'song-fight.' The Hindi songs played in that order converse aggressively with each other and metaphorically express the discord in their marriage. While translating their respective choice of songs, I infer that the devoted, fat wife is almost begging for love from a condescending husband. Here is the literal translation of the lyrics of their choice of songs:

Sandhya: "Return my sleep and the peace of my mind."

Prem: "Let me live and enjoy till I am alive! Let me drink in the monsoon!"

Sandhya: "How can I sit on the swing without my husband? How can I forget the promises?"

Prem: "Make peace with your woes."

Sandhya: "Get me paper, pen & inkpot. I will write my heart in your name. Leave alone the heart! Even if you ask for my life, I will give, give, give!"

Prem being forced to participate in the wife carrying race by his family.

Unlike expectations of docility, Sandhya is bold.



Sandhya, smiling at her wedding, with starry eyed dreams of a happy future.



Sandhya's saree camouflaging the harsh curvaceous contours of her fat body to give her a modest, likable, traditional Indian daughter-in-law look.



Sandhya's hair and dancing poses hiding the contours of her fat body.



The fat scholar Hesse-Biber (2007) in "How Young Women Experience Being A Body," **r**ecords interviews of women where she observes fat consciousness dawning on women only after being rejected and humiliated by a love interest, leading to feelings of low self-esteem and eating disorders. Even in the film, Sandhya turns a blind eye to the taunts of Prem's family and her own brother, while she suffers in humiliation and pain, and she fights with her paternal family to go on a diet when her own husband and lover Prem calls her a "buffalo."

Fat girl takes more space!

Space is framed in the movie to convey an implicit bias against Sandhya's body. Although, the camera movement and framing seemingly hide the "ugly" contouring of her fat body to make it look aesthetically appealing, the camerawork still frames that body to look comically big. The introductory shots of the locale show the narrow lanes and roads of the Indian town of Haridwar with rows of old, dilapidated houses on both sides. In continuation with such framing, Sandhya's body is first shown as partly camouflaged as she is covered by her mother from the front end and father from the behind; the family is stuck in a narrow lane. This sequence introduces the protagonist without revealing the exact proportions of her huge body. A paradoxically comical situation is emphasized in this shot because there is lack of free space in the narrow lane of Haridwar due to the overwhelmingly large body of the girl whose *saree* (traditional Indian dress) is draped in a way to hide the contouring of her body.

In a similar way, Joyce L. Huff in an essay "Access to the Sky"has written about the politics of space while occupying aeroplane seats. She critiqued the bodily norms and the corporate logic that distinguish between "good" fat people and "bad" fat people on the basis of who willingly pays extra for their tickets since they occupy more space. She has criticized such a corporatized organization of public space which discriminates against fat people and questions the notion of "the adaptable body" along with the airline's expensive inclusion of larger seats. Taking up this issue of a double standard for bodies, in Judith Butler's (1990) book *Gender Trouble* challenges disconnecting body from gender, for like sex and gender, she sees the body as a space governed by social constructs. She questions why the body becomes the means for determining gender in the first place. In contemporary times, this kind of thinking has led to observing and challenging manspreading, where men are socialized to take up excessive space while women are taught to take lesser space.

In the film, the plot depends on the camera showing the protagonist as taking up too much space. The introductory scenes are full of instances wherein the camera frames Sandhya as bigger and more dominating than her husband, Prem. All the wedding dancing shots of the wife show her at the center which connotes her dominance and confidence while Prem is off-centered or relegated to the side of the frame. The only time Prem is kept in the center is when he is flanked by the family members who seem to be scapegoating him with wedding rituals he detests. Even in the wedding night scene, the bed is framed in such a way that makes Sandhya look more overbearing and dominating and the framing slightly foregrounds her more than Prem. The composition accentuates the size difference between the couple and to make her look motherly to him. This pattern is also played out in the script. In the telephonic conversation with her friend the next morning, Sandhya jokingly compares Prem to a lost calf in the forest as she talks about his meek attitude and non-performance in bed. In this way, the film utilizes a comic trope wherein the fat woman looks like a mother to the thinner romantic male counterpart. Interestingly, the opposite dynamics rarely play out in romantic comedies wherein a fat male fathers a thinner female. While looking for a parental Sandhya' full length nightgown representing the slowly creeping influence of western values.

figure in romantic love might occur often in daily life, as Charisse Goodman (1995) notes, film and television are relatively forgiving for large men but not so for fat women. She writes that male admirers of big women are commonly portrayed as little boys looking for a motherly figure, yet such an observation about mixing sexual and parent-child love does not hold true for the opposite pairing.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Sandhya's costuming as a school teacher.

Costuming the fat body

Sandhya has a dual identity between work and home, with a double burden common for many Indian women. This is represented through her costumes. We first view Sandhya in the movie as a well-dressed Indian adult woman of marriageable age who is going with her family to impress Prem as a suitor in an arranged marriage setup in a temple. Her hair is stylishly oiled and coiffed in the dominant hairstyle of the women in the 1990's. She sports a saree with a golden border of a specific type worn on special occasions by Indian women to look sophisticated. As she is also a teacher by profession, she wears a wrist watch on one of her wrists and has bangles on the other, a simple contrast which metaphorizes the schizophrenic identity of working women in India who have two full-time jobs. She carries a handbag, which is evidently a cheap copy of a big label. Sandhya is a progressive woman with a modern outlook. Her discomfort in wearing a saree is depicted in her calling out to her mother to fix it with pins. This small request shows she is forced to wear a saree to honor the traditions required of an ideal Indian daughter-in-law, especially in a conservative, small town setting.

It is also worth noticing that though the necklines of the blouses worn with the saree are V-neck, they are shallow cut with long sleeves. They not only hide the maximum proportions of her body but also indicate the modesty of Indian married women in a religious town in the 1990's. Furthermore, the saree blouse with sleeves to wrists or elbows worn with puffed shoulders was a dominant fashion trend among actresses then. But it must be remembered that this also meant camouflaging the harsh curvaceous reality of her fat body while making her look shy, modest and likeable. In this scene, the saree becomes a tool she can use in playing the role of a traditional daughter-in-law as Sandhya holds one end of it to cover her head and mouth. She has to act shy to fulfill the expectations of the elderly in Prem's family who belong to a lower middle class with more conservative values. However, elsewhere in the film, she is a bold, outspoken girl who is capable of using her attire to convey the image she wants without looking out of place. Sandhya's scant, simple golden jewelry and minimal henna designs represent her modest class status and her small town culture where people live simply and get married in mass wedding ceremonies. Sandhya sports a lighter facial makeup to retain her innocent and natural, raw look as she is still the lead female character who needs to be likable and relatable to the contemporary audience, despite her fatness, to move the story forward.

Sandhya's outspokenness becomes visible when she confidently takes it on herself to make the first sexual move with her shy husband. At that point she wears a violet, western style, full-length satin gown with a lacy border; the gown sticks to her body so she sports a sexually appealing look. This costume design was probably incorporated into the film due to the slowly creeping influence of western media in India, especially through television and pornography where clinging satin gowns were beginning to get associated with sexuality. Her full-length gown has a shallow neckline to maintain Sandhya's image as a modest wife of the 1990's but it gets slightly tight at the breasts to accentuate them and also gives a narrower appearance to her torso. The silver anklets that she wears are used visually to depict the interaction of the couple's feet to build sexual tension,



Sandhya initiating sexual scene in the film boldly, defying Indian expectations of a shy wife.



Sandhya depicted as bold partner who makes the first move in bed.



Dancing scene at the end of the song *Dard Karaara* shows Sandhya in bright clothes with floral, loud prints.



At the end, a rich, bright color palette is created by Sandhya's costumes and that of the crowd dancers.



Contrast between symmetrically arranged pillows with flowers and conflicted marital relations.

and they also make an aesthetically appealing sound when she moves in the bed to initiate a sexual scene. Her hair is kept untied to fall over her shoulders, for the first time she gets a wild look free from the conventions of propriety that bind an Indian woman. She dons a golden marital necklace (*mangalsutra*) and a few golden bangles and a nose ring that shine in the darkness of the room, adding to the aesthetic appearance. At this point, her facial makeup is done simply to give her a natural, bedtime look.

In general, film costumes provide a further extension of Judith Butler's (1990) idea of gender as a performance, one constructed through imitation which has nothing innate and natural about it. In this case, as fat studies scholars Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag (2009) [open bibliography page in new window] point out, the film works with social and cultural attitudes that consider feminine fatness as the antithesis to the broader cultural definition of "appropriately feminine." Therefore, despite Sandhya's efforts to resist societal mores and expectations, a "cosmetic panopticon" is constructed around her that pressurizes her into becoming the "ideal feminine body-subject." (Giovanelli, and Ostertag, 289-290) Giovanelli and Ostertag write about this cosmetic panopticon as a media-induced system of permanent surveillance and judgment. We constantly hear concerns about physical appearance and standards of beauty, especially about clothes, hair and body size, and these concerns then are all fitted into accepted discourse with suggestions for women to follow and submit to.

In the movie, I also analyze Sandhya's costumes with respect to their function on a dancing fat body. In the dancing sequence at the end credit song "Dard Karaara", Sandhya wears noticeably loud bright dresses. In that dancing sequence, her lipstick color turns into a brighter red and her facial makeup is highlighted more to portray a fairer, shinier and happier face. All the dancing scenes are shot either as long-shots, wide-shots or medium-shots with the loud prints, colors and accessories used to distract attention from the fat body and convey a cheerful mood. A rich, bright color palette is created by her costumes and that of the crowd dancers. Throughout the film, the director has matched the color palette of Sandhya's clothing to her moods, characterization, and dramatic situations. In the major chunk at the beginning, Sandhya wears bright colors like red, yellow with golden borders, and big flowery prints. However, as the story progresses and Prem starts to ignore Sandhya's advances, her sarees change to duller colors like navy blue, pale white and pink, ordinary looking white prints, and pale mustard sweaters; and her bangles become fewer as she is shown engaging in household chores. Her perfect plaits become loosely braided with some unkempt flicks to convey a worn-out appearance and depression as she faces rejection from her husband. However, the director is more complex, since the connotations shift. We can also interpret her hairstyle with long, fuzzy sideflicks as indicative of her bold and transgressive nature when they are portrayed in fighting sequences with her husband and in the scene where she assertively discusses her marital rights with the divorce lawyer.

Camera and framing

The camera and framing patterns the status and development of the couple's relationship dynamics from a cold attitude towards worsening relations to the final reconciliation. They also work to expose the double standards of Indian society where marriage becomes an institution of social convenience rather than love. For instance, the shot of the wedding night where Prem refuses any interest in his wife and sleeps without any interaction is a high angle shot. It shows a rosily symmetrical picture of both of them in bed with symmetrically arranged pillows donning flower prints and framed with rows of marigold flowers. It is done to show how even a forced marriage looks idyllic in the eyes of society where



Sandhya aggressively negotiating for a divorce with the lawyer.



Extreme wide, low angle shot capturing both the partners standing on the bridge over the river Ganges, hinting at reconciliation.

everything is beautiful from outside but the inside relations are conflicted.

The divorce court scene where both the partners come together with the family is another symmetrical scene which is a medium-wide shot where both Sandhya and Prem occupy equal space in the frame and are at the center, flanked by family members on both sides. However, the framing of the courtroom shows four doors in the background out of which only the door on the side of Sandhya towards the right is open which breaks the symmetry and suggests that she has more agency than Prem to walk out.





The divorce court scene with a mediumwide shot where both Sandhya and Prem occupy equal space in the frame and where Sandhya asserts authority as she asks for divorce.

Framing of the courtroom shows four doors in the background out of which only the door on the side of Sandhya towards the right is open which breaks the symmetry and suggests that she has more agency than Prem to walk out.

This is the brief period in the movie when one views Sandhya aggressively retaliating to fat- shaming behavior even in public space but it is very short-lived as she chooses to come back to Prem's house due to court's order for a six month "cooling -off" period. This is a period stipulated by the Indian legal system where the couple has to stay together for six months and try to work out their differences. Following this, the lowest point in Prem's life is described again through an aerial shot of the examination room where Prem gave up on his effort to clear high school exams and wrote a suicide note in the exam while admitting his defeat. This shot reduces his stature and self-esteem and hits home the fact that he has failed in his attempt to rebel against a forced marriage.

A major scene which hints at their reconciliation is an extreme wide, low angle shot capturing both the partners standing on the bridge over the river Ganges in the dark. This scene finally suggests that they have emerged above the superficiality of social mores and family lies and have come together as partners in real sense while accepting each other's weaknesses. The framing of the scene includes the walls in two- thirds of the frame with the river at the bottom signifying reducing barriers.





Reconciliatory and decisive, the wifecarrying race is framed against the yellow, sandy backdrop of cheering crowds of Haridwar.

Obstacles in the obstacle race.





Obstacles during the race.

A still showing Prem and Sandhya enjoying the race, hinting at their reconciliation.

At the end, the town's reconciliatory and decisive wife-carrying race was framed against the yellow, sandy backdrop of cheering crowds of Haridwar. A moving camera is panning, tracking and showing special effects to convey the excitement. The camera movement and framing show how Sandhya's presence of mind, her suggestions about technicalities for overcoming obstacles during the race, and her hand lift bring in the transformative moment in the race. We see an extreme closeup of the hand offering and the look of surprise on Prem's face as she hand lifts him out of the mud pit in which they were stuck.





Sandhya's hand lift that brings in the transformative moment in the Wife-Carrying race and turns the tables in favor of the couple.

All close-ups in the second half of the race are on the fast-moving feet of Prem and the determined and winning expressions on his face that even cut out Sandhya from the frame .





Another shot which focuses on Prem's grit and undercuts Sandhya's importance.

Camera shots seem to celebrate the victory in the race as Prem's victory and highlight his masculine expressions more than Sandhya.

Though Prem and Sandhya were lagging behind initially in the race because of Sandhya's fatness, her technical knowledge, impeccable mentoring offered to Prem, and their coordination helped them to finally match up to the finalists. Yet, the camera framing in the second half of the race works to undercut Sandhya's significance and gives credit for the victory to Prem. All close-ups in the second half of the race are on the fast-moving feet of the husband and the stubbornly determined expression on his face to win. In fact, Sandhya is also out of the framing in the subsequent shots that give the final credit of victory to Prem as he carries her up to the finish line thereby propping up his masculine ego.

Even the lyrics of the background music played in the race have connotations of masculine competitiveness and employ phrases like these: "Fire your breath like a bullet"; "Scale all walls, cross all rivers"; "What if the world is jealous, no need for modesty"; and "If anyone tries to sneak away, show him up." Such lyrics depict the importance of defeating Prem's arch enemy in this traditional wife-carrying obstacle race. This victory served two purposes. Firstly, it gave back a sense of



Reconciliatory scene after the couple wins the race leading to a kiss in the marital home.

self-worth that Prem had lost by being a high-school dropout. Secondly, it helped him to save his audio-cassette shop that he was at a risk of losing. In a bet, his arch enemy promised to give it back if Prem won the race.

Such a climax to the plot proves that the film uses the wife's fatness not for her own liberation but for reconfirming the ego of her husband—who could finally accept her as his wife only when she was instrumental in making him a winner in front of the entire town. The seductiveness of this romanticized race works effectively with the upbeat music to depict a happy ending that actually disguises a fat shaming ideology beneath it. To look at possible solutions to this fat shaming ideology one can look at Bell Hooks' (1996) proposal in "Artistic Integrity: Race and Accountability" to change an established pattern of media viewing wherein "a new aesthetic way of looking is taught to audiences." Also, as I look at Bell Hooks' article "The Oppositional Gaze" in context of fat studies, I find that watching Bollywood movies could mean engaging in considering fatness representation. I find fat women either absent, oversexualized or misrepresented. Even when representations of fat women are present, their bodies too often are performing the function of enhancing and maintaining the womanhood of the thin actress as an object of the phallocentric gaze.





The high camera angle looks down upon Sandhya from the top of the terrace where a drunk Prem expresses his irritation at having a fat wife.

Sandhya, carefreely dancing at prewedding function of Prem's friend just before she heard Prem humiliating her in front of his friends.





On the terrace above the party, a drunk Prem expresses his frustration to his friends at having to sleep with a fat wife.

Sandhya slaps Prem after hearing him body-shame her.

For example, in this film, consider the camera angle at the height of the conflict on the night before Sandhya leaves her husband's house. The high camera angle looks down upon her from the top of the terrace where a drunk Prem expresses his frustration to his friends at having to sleep with a fat wife. The occasion here is of a pre-wedding ceremony of Prem's close friend. The womenfolk including Sandhya are dancing in the lawns downstairs. This high camera angle overlooking a fat Sandhya, who is being insulted, reduces and diminishes Sandhya due to Prem's jealousy of his friend's thinner wife.

I conclude that this disadvantaged position of fat women in Bollywood is similar to that of Black women in Hollywood movies as elucidated by Bell Hooks. The cycle of thin supremacy, similar to the cycle of white supremacy, also leads to a painful cinema-going experience for fat women in India. In this essay, I draw this conclusion from a case study, a movie wrapped in the beauty of romance with underlying themes of economic class, social identity and gender embedded in it. If looked at in the right way, it could be seen as a satire on fat bias in Indian society

in the context of a small town Haridwar during a time when India media and economy was globalizing and undergoing a period of transition.

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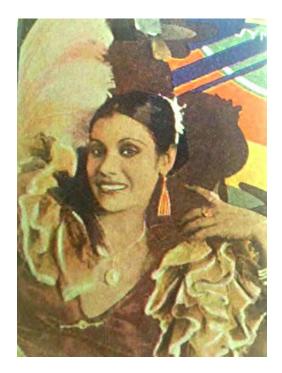
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Azurie in the song booklet for the film *Bhen ka Prem* (J.K. Nanda, 1935). All images from the book *Dancing Women, Chroreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema* by Usha lyer.

Documenting a corporeal history of dance in Hindi cinema

review by Rutuja Deshmukh

Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema by Usha Iyer (Oxford University Press, 2020).

In Dancing Women Usha Iyer takes her readers through a fascinating journey of Hindi film dance and its corporeal histories; she centres her analysis on female cultural labour in the Bombay film industry. Her approach differs from most scholarly work on labour and the media, which focuses predominantly on mode of production. For this reason, Iyer's corporeal reading of dance form in Hindi cinema initiates an important intervention in the area of cultural labour studies. Dancing Women brings in a fresh perspective as well to feminist film scholarship. The main figurations in the book are the women dancers in feature film from the 1930s to 1990s—Azurie, Sadhona Bose, Vyjayantimala, Helen, Waheeda Rehman, Madhuri Dixit, and Saroj Khan. Iyer explains how these dancing women of Bombay cinema from various caste, class, religious and racial backgrounds cocreate and co-choreograph a "dance-scape," a concept which helps us understand the material history of dancing bodies. Her work also emphasizes the importance "silenced" bodies, that is, lower-caste traditional performers tawaifs (courtesans), devdasis (temple dancers), cinematic vamps, background dancers and dancers performing body as body doubles for star dancers.

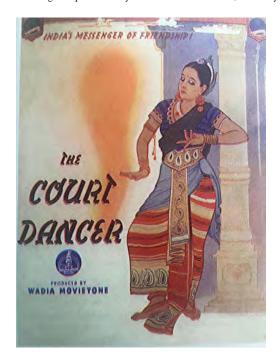
Existing scholarship on dance in Hindi cinema mostly considers song and dance as an integrated practice. (Gopal and Moorti, 2008) Questions of evolving practices of song and dance in popular Hindi cinema have been analysed at length by Gehlawat and Dudrah (2017). In addition, taking up a class analysis, Morcom (2013) discusses fundamental paradigm shifts that aided India's bourgeois nation building project. Her work exposes how female erotic performance was excluded as a crucial part of this embourgeoisement of the performing arts at a time when Hindi film industry, after India's economic liberalisation in 1990s which, initiated a changed outlook towards dance erotica.

Iyer considers the dancing body itself as both scripting and scripted by Hindi cinema. She traces how changes in signifying practices in the Bombay film industry advanced new histories in India of the female body. With a detailed account of careers of Sadhana Bose, Azurie and Vyjayantimala, and their movements between stage and screen, Iyer constructs a movement vocabulary to understand current debates in film studies around respectability, corporeal expressivity, and intensity. Iyer's meticulous chronology, which is not necessarily linear, analyses discursive formations around gender, female mobility and public presence.

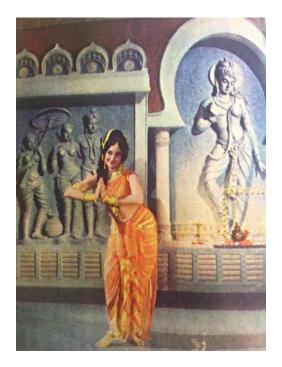


Kumkum the Dancer (Modhu Bose, 1940)

In her first chapter, "Dance Musicalization and Choreomusiking Body: Corporealising Theoretical Frameworks of Film Dance and Music," Iyer sets the tone of her argument by positing questions of qualitative difference between spectatorial engagement with dance numbers and with song sequences. Her focus is on song *picturization*, a popular term in the industry, which is the practice of recording a song first and then adding visuals. In this way she broadens critical discussion of the production of dance numbers and of music composition, particularly as responding to the dancing skills of dance actors. Iyer's focus on the categorisation of filmic dance as narrative numbers and production numbers provides a fresh perspective on the scholarship on dance and music in Hindi cinema. She categorises filmic dance as narrative numbers and production numbers thereby laying foundation for a catalogue of integrated, non-diegetic song and dance sequences. The song-dance sequence integrated in lyrical content to the plot is narrative number, whereas a dance number that is situationally or spatially not co-ordinated with the filmic moment is non-diegetic. In this



Court Dancer (Modhu Bose, 1941) from the song booklet.



Vyjayantimala in a still from *Amrapali* (Lekh Tandon, 1966).

insightful analyses of narrative pleasures of the text and spectacle over narrative, Iyer foregrounds the corporeal gestures of dancing bodies in Hindi cinema.

In Iyer's words, in the construction of female star text, dance is often the legitimised form of mobility for the female performer, while action or fights perform the same function for a male performer. She furthers her argument with examples from *Tezaab* and bodily gestures of female and male star 'entry' or introduction. Her enquiry into this gendered introduction of male and female lead actors theorises the sensation and attractions gained through choreography.

Using a kinaesthetic theorisation of empathy which signals towards bodily movements that signify certain feelings, she initiates a movement-oriented psychoanalysis of dance. It counters one-way logics of film spectatorship based on analysis or reception alone thereby theorising performance and reception. The questions of "respectability" attached to certain dance forms like Bharatnatyam and embourgeoisiement of these forms calls for a thorough engagement with questions of cultural labour and performance. She brings in critical scholarship on the dance forms in Indian cinema of 1930s and 1940s that involved an appropriation of the cultural practices of traditional performers like *devdasis* and *tawaifs* by upper caste and class performers, as part of the nationalist project. Detailed account of Vyjayantimala's dancing body, enhanced rhythmic structures and her performance of folk as well as *Bharatnatyam* form reinforces national integration.

In the following chapter, using Henri Lefebvre's argument based on a spatio-temporality of moving body, public intimacy and the movement vocabularies are discussed at length. Reading of dance movements through a body-space-movement framework becomes a crucial aspect. Iyer's in-depth enquiry into the Sadhana Bose and Vyjayantimala's presence in the films that necessitated the construction of film sets depicting a temple or court. The construction of *Kotha* or calendar art inspired sets facilitated sexual intimacy in public and private spaces. This spatial reading of dance furthers with feudal spaces of *kothas* versus illicit landscape of gambling in case of a cabaret number.

The spatial practices of the background dancers and the conventions of folk dance bring in a whole new set of dance vocabulary. Iyer stresses upon the choreographed, synchronised dancing of the background performers is not inspired singularly by Hollywood traditions of uniformly lined up chorus girls but also by Indian classical and folk traditions. Her insights are attuned to the subcontinental logics of capitalism and working-class women's stake in South Asian modernity. That is, post 1990s with the arrival big budget and more industrialised production of dance numbers means that film style changes to a more 'internationally aligned' aesthetics of background dancers. In this case, working class women dancers in film are replaced by upper class Indian dancers trained at dance schools in the metropolitan cities.



Helen in a still from Caravan (Nasir Hussain, 1971)

The third chapter, "Corporealizing Colonial Modernities," offers an enquiry into the new mobilities around what is understood as Indian modern dance. Iyer does this through detailed accounts of the careers of Azurie and Sadhana Bose and how their dance expressed nationalist constructions. Iyer's lucid writing lays out nuances of women's participation in dance and in cinema during the period of high nationalism of 1930s-1940s, when the cultural forms were under great pressure to address and appeal to a bourgeois audience. Through analysing the roles and the performances of the *bhadramahila* ("cultured lady") Sadhona Bose and of the "dancing girl," Azurie, Iyer traces the many debates at work around dancing women in these decades. In discussing the careers of both Sadana Bose and Azurie, Iyer foregrounds the 'revival' of dance forms during the late colonial period in India.

Both Azurie and Sadhana Bose owed their stardom to dance; however, Bose's career as a performer found patronage in the narrative of embourgeoisement and nationalist project whereas Azurie's career brings to the fore questions about the mobility and visibility of women dancers from the margins. As Iyer discusses the history of appropriation and reinstating of 'respectable' dance form, she traces the anti-*nautch* movement to 'rehabilitation' of temple dance. In so doing she emphasizes issues like de-sensualising the dance form and female agency through class and caste perspectives. The debates around self-censorship and denudation of erotic connotations from the screen and initiation of *Bhadramahila*—'respectable' woman— in Hindi cinema highlight figurations of dance, gestural genealogy and questions of caste in the late colonial period. The

dance, gestural genealogy and questions of caste in the late colonial period. The aesthetics and politics of dance move through all these contestations from the portrayals and acting of workingwomen to upper caste and class women. Iyer brings forth these nuanced debates through meticulous portrayal of the careers of Bose and Azurie.

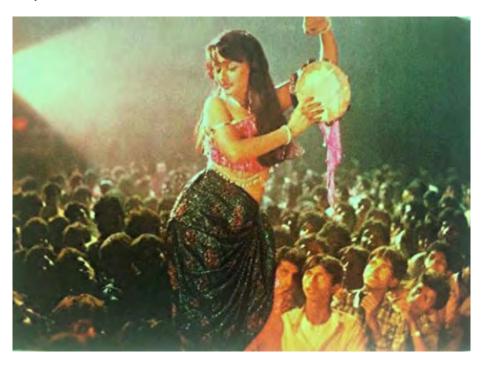
Chapter four deals with the constructions of ideal femininity and participation of dancing women in the public sphere. Iyer looks at the evolving meanings of "classical" and "Folk" dance forms in post-colonial nation state. Waheeda Rehman and Vyjayantimala work towards a 'sanitised' image of dance in Hindi cinema. She shows how dance training influences acting repertoires. Both Waheeda

Rehman, a Tamil Muslim and Vyjayantimala, a Tamil Hindu trained in *Bharatanatyam*, work their careers around dance and acting, while battling the stereotypes. Vyjaytanimala on one hand is perceived as an accomplished dancer, must prove her acting skills whereas Rehman considered a natural actor strives to fit the mould of a *Bharatanatyam* dancer.



Waheeda Rehman in Guide (Vijay Anand, 1965)

In her final chapter followed by Epilogue, Iyer extends the debates around cultural labour, sexual desire and public performance through diminishing lines between the performance of a heroine and a vamp in 1990s Hindi cinema. Hindi film actors of this period initiated a merging of the figure of a vamp and heroine through their libidinous dancing bodies. An interview with Madhuri Dixit provides an insight into the new scandalous dance vocabulary of dance, where this actress and her choreographer Saroj Khan consistently challenge conventions of 'respectability'. In the discussion of contemporary television dance shows, Iyer points out the corporeal inhabitations, where the trained dancers perform same gestures back to Madhuri Dixit and Saroj Khan thereby building on intermedial dance careers in film, reality TV dance shows and on web platforms.



Madhuri Dixit in a still from Tezaab (N. Chandra, 1998)

Iyer's work provides a corporeal history of dance in Hindi cinema by exploring dance's discursive shift. Her thoughtfulness in attending to training, rehearsals, background dancers, and star career lets her trace a history of Hindi cinema through labouring bodies of women. This reinterpretation of Hindi film history from the perspective of women dancers is an inspiration to read a film corporeally, which offers a radical paradigm shift for the larger field of media studies.

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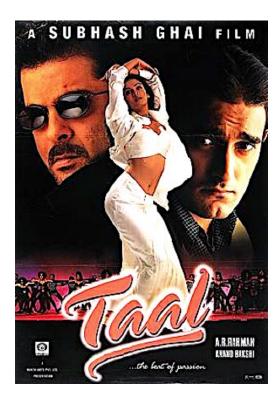
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Poster of *Taal* (1999). Fantasies about love and desire accentuated by dancing figure in cener.



A still from the song *Taal se Taal Mila* (1999) — a 90s film centered on dance.

Bodily fluid: the movement of Bollywood dance from body to body

by Paromita Vohra

For long, the song-and-dance elements of Indian cinema were seen as guilty pleasures, not to mention proof of its artistic inferiority.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Even today, when this approach is being reassessed, it is not uncommon to hear the dismissive term 'dancing around trees.' It is presented as an emblem of popular Hindi cinema's infantile silliness, apparently on account of both unrealism and coyness about sex, disallowed by censorship. Into present time, directors of the new wave of Bollywood 'indies' declare their squeamishness with the song-and-dance routine, and they talk about how they work around it in their films as it is a necessity of the market rather than an artistic preference. Their solutions are often presented as bringing songs into the film within the purview of logic. The chief criticism of the song-and-dance routine is rooted in the idea that linearity and realism are superior qualities of cinema, and song and dance disrupt linearity of plot while being completely unrealistic.

But popular Hindi cinema does not favor realism as an aesthetic. Rather, it functions through a number of simultaneous symbolic languages. Bollywood dance—as the amalgamative, energetic mixture of folk, classical, Indian and international dance—forms into a cinematic item, it is now known, as one of these symbolic languages. Dance occurs in films in varied ways and contexts. Sometimes it is a folksy performance watched by benign urban visitors; sometimes a private reverie where someone, usually a woman, fantasizes about forthcoming love and desire, frolicking in nature; sometimes a private romantic/erotic play between lovers. It occurs in a variety of dance styles, producing a popular version of everything from *Bharatanatyam* [2] to *Cha Cha Cha*.

To comprehensively examine the archive of Bollywood dance is a giant undertaking. My effort in this essay is not to be comprehensive, but to trace one kind of Bollywood dance to show something fundamental about the function of dance in Bollywood and about the nature of popular Hindi cinema's relationship with bodies. I will trace some developments within a particular item of dance often found in Hindi films: the staged dance performance which gained popularity in the 1940s and transformed in various ways until the 1990s. After this it remains vestigially in films as the item number—unless, of course, it is a film centered on dance, such as *Taal* (1999, Subhash Ghai) or *ABCD* (2013, Remo D'Souza).

Perhaps capitalizing on playback-singing technology to expand the repertoire of dance entertainment, the staged dance was a staple of films of the 1940s and 1950s. It was almost always presented as a tableau of some kind—combining backdrops and props with stylized group formations to communicate a social argument. A notable example is the song 'Door hato ai duniyawalon, Hindustan hamara hai' (trans. A way with you, people of this world, India is ours) from the



A woman performing an Indian Classical Dance.



Poster for *Mr. Sampat* (1951) where the women dance in graduation robes proud of getting a BA.



Mumtaz Askari in Aap Ki Kasam (1974).

1942 super-hit Kismat (1943, Gyan Mukherjee). Apparently, this was a song to support the war effort of the ruling colonial power, Britain, in World War II against German and Japanese enemies, as indicated by the lines: 'Shuru hua hai jung tumhara, jaag utho Hindustani/Tum na kisike aage jhukna, German ho ya Japani' (trans. Your war has begun now, arise o Indian/Bend before no one, neither Japanese nor German). This overt message about the colonially supportive Indian disguised another Indian, the nationalist in-the-making. A map of India recurred through the pattern on the stage curtain, through a backdrop and through the formation of dancers in a clear V-shape to mimic the map of India through their bodies. In the final stanza of the song, a woman dressed as 'Mother India' [3] appears, almost held aloft by a bank of trumpet music. The men and women, along with the lyrics of the song, represent several 'types' of Indians, familiar to us today as community types who symbolize the Indian secularist imagery of unity in diversity (Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Isai/Christian). These bodies merge with the bodies of soldiers who are meant to fight the British war, but with raised fists, they are clearly coding the dance as a performance about India's struggle for independence. The audience joins the chorus, joins this nationalist or colonial Indian identity—as it chooses, perhaps, or perhaps even both.

This kind of staged performance watched by a live audience via a filmed audience—from a double distance, in a sense—frequently concerned itself with the idea of Indianness. How to reconcile the idea of a traditional, ethnically inflected India, whose village roots were being glorified via Gandhianism, with the simultaneous nationalist idea of a 'modern, secular', religiously inflected India?

These tensions provided a basis for the staged dance items, which took place in the form of an argument between these two impulses: tradition vs. modernity, rootedness vs. deracination, urban vs. rural, vernacular vs. English-speaking. Very often they played out through stories of romance and relationships and ideal women, sometimes men. The narratives frequently debated the merits of 'traditional' vs. 'modern' women on the basis of dress, literacy, urbanization and, also, erotic willingness. The narratives were laced with an anxiety about women's sexuality within the world of Indian progress, education and mobility, which was addressed in different ways through these dances.

A striking example is the song 'Hum hain Bharat ki naari, sabse nyaari' (trans. We are the women of India, the best of all women) from the 1952 film Mr Sampat (1952, S S Vasan) based on R.K. Narayan's novel of the same name. It was also made in Tamil under the title Miss Malini (1947, dir. Kothamangalam Subbu). The song begins with a row of urban women declaring themselves Indian women, the best of all, and carrying out a hand movement used to ward off the evil eye when you praise someone—in this case themselves, and perhaps by extension modern Indian women viewers. In subsequent stanzas of the song, they perform in graduation robes, declaring themselves hard-working and educated, 'B.A. Pass', dedicated to improving themselves. But alas, they declare, traditional India does not appreciate them. For when they marry, they meet with the mother-in-law's scorn.

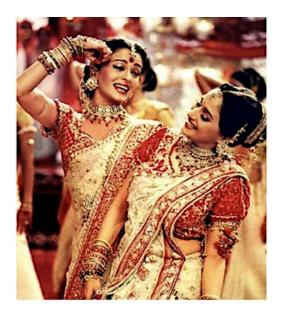
Cue mothers-in-law: a row of women dressed as old-fashioned hags with crooked sticks come forth in a hobbling step, dismissing these women, these 'padhi-likhi



Amir Khan and Juhi Chawla singing around the tree in *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988).



Deepika Padukone dancing in the film *Om Shanti Om* (2007).



Song Dola Re Dola in Devdas (2002).

titli' (trans. educated butterflies) who will never be able to do hard domestic labor like grinding wheat. Enter a row of women who can, wearing 'filmi rural' dress—short *ghagra* [4] skirts and half-saris—and presenting themselves as demure.

They are met by a row of men dressed in suits. They scold the 'traditional' women, calling them, "Stupid! Idiot! Illiterate!" How can these uneducated girls make good wives for modern Indian men? Further, declares the song, with such a wife, 'ab to romance of the life, khatam ho gaye saare' (trans. That puts paid to romance in life).

In one deft verse, the dance plays out all the tensions of changing Indian society as a cultural battle of womanhood being fought by women, even while staging women's desire for progress as the necessary condition for her being a modern Indian man's helpmate. And yet, the ambiguities and layering of the staged dance make this not so simple. The message is undercut by the arrogance of the men's dance-steps.

In the next stanza, the educated women reappear dressed as nurses. Now, they state how their education is really for looking after people—'hum seva karne ko, dekho aayi' (trans. Look, we are here to serve). They are followed by a group of men bearing stethoscopes round their necks who try to romance them: 'Nurse, you make my heart beat faster.' At this point, oddly enough, the song finishes, with the nurse-women never having to respond to the doctors' rising blood pressure.

But, in this verse the tension of the educated woman being selfish, unable to look after others as per her domestic role, is smoothly subsumed (as it was in society) into a noble 'looking after' profession. The two bodies—of the woman who serves and the woman who deserves—are merged into a woman who does both, somewhat.

Most importantly, the nature of the women's dance is entirely unornamental. The steps are brisk, near-military, with no bodily excess. The body is composed, contained. The woman in these dances seeking education, modernity, mobility, does so by boiling out the sexual, by presenting a precise, desexualized progressive womanhood, a delimited mobility. Men, already set up as arrogant in the earlier part of the set-piece, yet again present themselves as loose-limbed and shallow. The women's pursuits, on the other hand, are self-improvement and social good, not pleasure: mobility justified by nobility.

The men, stiff and arrogant or shallow and louche, become represented as unmoored, deracinated sensualists, and are at the same time absolved of the weight of carrying forward moral tradition in their bodies, a task which falls squarely on female shoulders. In other staged songs, though, this idea of westernized masculinity as ludicrous and feminized is also explored. In 'Aana meri jaan, Sunday ke Sunday' (trans. Come by darling, every Sunday) from the film Shehnai (1947, P L Santoshi), a male dancer dressed as Charlie Chaplin, mimicking the staccato movements of silent film speed, tries to woo a traditional rural woman. He offers to take her to Paris, London and other fleshpots to dance and romance, and, moreover, to eat non-vegetarian food ('murgi ke ande'/eggs). Here, the rural woman rejects him firmly, presenting the contrasting masculinity of her muscular husband who chases after him with a stick. Even as he sidles offas he is, naturally, a coward—he is rescued by a woman in jodhpurs who arrives bearing a gun, masterfully saying, 'Oh my dear, come come come.' The idea presented in this dance—where the man is weak and comical while the woman is firm and masculine—is, of course, that in modernity, men were emasculated by emancipated women. And yet, in the cheeriness of their dance, they seem



Madhuri Dixit and Aishwarya Rai in an iconic dance sequence in *Devdas* (2002).



Folk dance from *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram Leela* (2013).



Aishwarya Rai from the song *Taal se Taal Mila* (1999).



somewhat made for each other, even if they don't quite fit the ideal image of feminine and masculine, allowing you to see it as you will.

The staged performance became a way to iterate the normative Indian body. especially in terms of gender, though also of location and, by extension, class and caste. Even as this was a very developed, didactic thread of Hindi film dances, other threads existed in the same film that too might be staged performances but did not play out didactic messages. Rather, their unadulterated purpose was pleasure and enjoyment. In fact, the film discussed above, Mr. Sampat (1952, S. S. Vasan)—which interestingly also explores the tensions between print's noble cerebral qualities and cinema's more misleading bodily qualities—features performances that include a generically Islamicate court dance as well as a Kathak-style courtesanal dance. These often featured only the minor characters. But they might also feature the protagonists, as in the song 'Shola jo bhadke' (trans. when the ember sparks) from the 1951 film Albela (1951, Bhagwan), where there is an unproblematized dance of love and seduction between a woman and a man in a Hawaiian setting. The dance is sinuous, love is joy, the body is free—a cosmopolitan enjoyment of material and bodily pleasures played out and approved by the protagonists of the film.

A more interesting version of this performance was the queer staged dance. In these dances, male characters were often played by women and vice versa. A famous song, 'O gore gore, o banke chhore' (trans. Hey boy, fair of face, full of grace), from the 1957 film Samadhi (1950, Ramesh Saigal), has the female and male parts all played by female actors. In another film, Half-Ticket (1962, Kalidas), there is a song with the actor Pran dressed as a man and actor Kishore Kumar dressed as a woman. At other times men dress as women and women as men—for instance, the popular 'Kajra mohabbat wala, akhiyon mein aisa dala' (trans. Oh that kohl of love that changed my eyes), which featured the actor Biswajeet as a woman and the actress Babita as a man, with her/him seducing him/her. The backdrop against which this song takes place is of the Red Fort and the Qutub Minar-monuments of the national capital but also monuments of a bygone Mughal era. Both actors are dressed in Islamicate dress—Biswajeet in a gharara [5] as a respectable Muslim woman, and Babita as a Pathan. The underlying connotation of homosexuality, an urban legend that accrues to the figure of the Pathan, is also threaded through this queer performance.

While presented quite routinely as a part of the entertainment in earlier films, soon enough this cross-dressing dance would appear under some pretext or excuse—while hiding from criminals, the police, or persecutors of some kind. Sometimes it would even be that the dancing partners were adversaries, carrying out their conflict covertly and in plain sight.

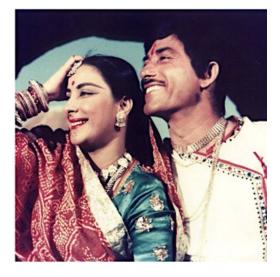
It would not be an over-reading to see this as a presentation of queerness, its histories and its conditions through dance without ever stating it as such—analogous to the presentation of Indian independence and nationalism under the pretext of supporting the war effort in *Kismat* (trans. fate, 1943, Gyan Mukherjee). In other words, even while dance was used to serve a didactic function it simultaneously provided spectators with sensory pleasures—whether performed as a social necessity, an intimate pleasure, or even a sign of decadence. While the context might inflect the dance, the dance itself provided pure pleasure—guilty, disingenuous, or simple—to the viewers.

The presence of these diverse dancing bodies is historically important. In her book, *Courtesans, Bar Girls and Dancing Boys: The Illicit Worlds of Indian*

Dancers in *ABCD – Any Body Can Dance* (2003).



Dancer Kum Kum in a 1950s film.



Nargis and Raaj Kumar in Mother India (1957).



Dance, Anna Morcom traces the disappearance of the skilled professional and often caste-based, hereditary dance performers, who inhabited a liminal world of acceptance though not respectability. The anti-nautch [6] purity movements of the nineteenth century decimated the profession of many of these communities —nats, tawaifs/courtesans, transgender dancers, ghazal [7] singers—conflating them with sex work, and pushing to have them outlawed and stigmatized. In doing this they robbed these communities of the idea of work, but also sanitized the world of Indian dance and music, limiting it to classical and faux-classical forms. Much of this was contingent on women not performing any more as a mark of purification, for the weight of the purity movements rested on the form of the female performer. One publication from the Punjab Purity Association quotes the social reformer Keshub Chandra Sen as saying that the nautch- girl was a

"hideous woman . . . hell in her eyes. In her breast is a vast ocean of poison. Round her comely waist dwell the furies of hell. Her hands are brandishing unseen daggers ever ready to strike unwary or willful victims that fall in her way. Her blandishments are India's ruin. Alas! her smile is India's death."

Even as the feudal zamindari economy and older royal houses crumbled, these movements marked the scattering of entire communities and also pleasure pastimes of common as well as aristocratic people. But these bodies and people and forms were drawn into the Parsi theatre and then the film industry over time, especially with Kathak dancers and *tawaifs* [8] (trans. courtesans) teaching and performing dances, and musicians performing in song recordings. There are known examples like that of Jaddan Bai who worked as a composer and film producer.

And there are several unknown names who worked in this industry, ghosts of another time and stage, peopling the studios of Bollywood, ventriloquizing their craft through the bodies of film actors and dance performances to an audience that had absorbed these ideas of morality, that consumed them with covert pleasure, wrapped up in the larger, normative narratives and bodies of the Hindi film.

Even while centralized narratives subsumed these bodies, erasing the memory of this world of dance and sexual existence, the unruly narrative style of the Hindi film contained many of these worlds as a demotic: the *mujra* [9] (trans. courtesanal dance) dancer who sometimes played a character, the cross-dressing dance, the transgender performance.

In this way film dance both established an ideal body and destabilized it with pleasurable counter-bodies, allowing both to coexist—some might say uneasily, others might say fluidly. These diverse threads, while remaining in the Hindi film in one form or the other, slowly ceased to be standard elements, however. As films began to focus more on urban love stories and family dramas, staying more within a particular class, the contexts for these dance forms decreased. Even as they slowly receded, becoming more occasional, they were nevertheless consolidated — most remarkably in the body of one woman, the most iconic of Indian film dancers: Helen.

Helen Richardson, of Burmese and Anglo-Indian descent, started her dancing career in Hindi films in 1951 as a chorus and occasional solo dancer. But she came to prominence in 1957 with the noir film *Howrah Bridge* (1958, Shakti Samanta), in a Chinese-style cabaret-item song, '*Mera naam Chin- Chin Chu*.' (trans. My name is Chin Chu) Her unmistakable lightness, her carefree and somewhat western movements, coupled with her 'foreign'—light-skinned, light-eyed, auburn-haired—appearance made her represent an idea of womanhood that was decidedly not Indian. From then, through the 1960s and until the mid-1970s,

Helen performing *Mera naam Chin Chin Chu* (1958). She seemed to look 'foreign and thus could 'play out the heady consumption of international pleasures.'

Helen featured in over 500 films, sometimes playing the part of a moll or a vamp, but mostly only featuring in one stand-out dance sequence.

It was as if Helen signified dance itself in Hindi films. She also took all the elements of earlier staged performances—setting, dress, style, flavor—and unified them in her very being as well as the nature of the dance. Almost all Helen's dance items were performed dances before a public, but not from the safe distance of the proscenium stage. Rather, the dance, usually a cabaret in a club setting, took place in the midst of the audience or at the same level as the audience. It might be blithe, brittle, frisky, sensual, frankly sexual or exploitatively sexual. The costume was revealing, but beyond that, highly glamorous, and moreover, so exaggerated as to be beyond body and in fact, practically, an installation.

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JUMP CUT

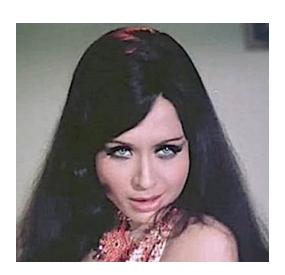
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Helen has performed traditional-seeming dances like Kathak and folk; she has been a belly-dancer, a go-go girl, a Moulin Rouge-style chorus girl, a dancer from a Brazilian carnival and much more. In each film her outfit, make-up, hair and dancing style were different, with a strongly self-aware stylistic presentation. She wore giant feathers, tiaras or Chiquita Banana-style fruit headdress, lined her eyes with diamantes, painted her lips in excessively pastel shades. Her outfits were made of satin, gauze, fur, metal, studded with gems—layered flamenco skirts, diaphanous harem pants, shiny bell-bottoms.





Every appearance Helen made had a surprise element attached to it.



Helen dancing to Yeh Mera Dil Pyar Ka Deewana - Don (1978). Sexy but not vulgar.

Jerry Pinto, in his book *The Life and Times of an H-Bomb*, has analyzed Helen as a figure symbolizing the sexualization of minority Christian women, as well as her bodily demeaning and association with the world of decadence and corruption. This is also symbolized by the club, in conjunction with the weak, inferior male Christian figure. While this packaging is undoubtedly an operational ready, the hallmark of Hindi cinema's densely packed symbolic languages is that the dances offer parallel, coexisting readings. Hence, Helen also played out, in about a decade-long career, almost every kind of marginal body as well as the heady consumption of international pleasures in the very material quality of her presence. Helen was all things—the stage and the dance, in the body of the dancer. In each film she presented this idea with a different stylistic cast—elaborate and consistent. Sometimes she died in a film; sometimes she never appeared again, having played out her performance. But she returned in the next film, with a completely different aesthetic. To this extent, she functioned much in the way that pandals function during big religious festivals like Ganpati [10] [open endnotes in new window] in Western India and Durga Puja in the East—representing the tableaux of current events, pleasures and aesthetics, and locating the deity amidst these; casting and recasting the deity through contemporary happenings and sensations; remixing them into the repertoire of the Indian; and passing them on through bodily movement.

It is often said of Helen that her dancing was 'sexy but not vulgar', unlike that of her imitators, or rather successors, like Jayashree T., Padma Khanna and others. While this is debatable, it was nevertheless a widely held notion among middle-



Helen posing for a picture—"the elaborate construction of her dance persona."

class urban viewers who freely admitted to their enjoyment of a Helen dance. I would argue that Helen helped create this feeling of sexy as pleasurable, not vulgar, through the elaborate construction of her dance persona—foregrounding skill, aesthetics, and the dance as construct. The performance became an inorganic thing, not something intrinsic to the body at some level, but something anyone could don or learn. In a sense, dance and its meanings became separated from the body through this constantly altering projection, thus also offering the idea of bodily mobility as opposed to a permanently determined, fallen body.

The Helen dance also created a comfort level with the idea of dance, and a more sexualized one at that, for pure pleasure. While it still had the prophylactic of an audience within the film that watched it, providing the real-life audience with an excuse to consume these pleasures, the arrival of the dancer in the midst of that audience allowed for a shooting style that sometimes eliminated the filmic audience and, through close-ups, brought her to the midst of the live audience, underlining their direct consumption of these pleasures, habituating them to this kind of body, generating a cinematic bodily contact otherwise forbidden, or at least unfamiliar, with a physical sexiness, a free female body.

Helen's most prominent phase was in the era of the romantic film where urban middle-class men and women, not usually separated by social identity, often fell in love in a location away from home or through chance encounters on roads as groups of girls frolicking on bicycles met brash men in cars. The presence of Helen certainly managed some of the anxieties around this kind of romantic choice, which is, after all, also sexual choice. It offered a clean separation between the sexualized woman and the romantically eroticized but monogamous heroine figure. This is also why a Helen dance always took place in a confined space, like the club, and her social as well as emotional mobility was constrained in return for the bodily flamboyance and sexual freedom, she emanated.







Helen singing in a nightclub, a special place away from daily life.



Helen's in box office hit Jewel Thief (1967).



Helen's tantalizing dance moves.



Dressed in black and gold Helen sings and dances to impress a shy man.



With a blonde mane and a pink swimsuit, Helen looks dressed to kill.



Madhuri Dixit dancing to Ek Do Teen (1988).

In contrast, the heroine of the film was often to be found singing in anticipation of adulthood through love and desire, but in innocent pastoral settings. Her womanhood was awakened by the arrival of a man in a garden or on a simple mountain road, and romance was then carried out in manicured gardens, nature shaped by human hands. This often took place as another popular item of the Hindi film dance catalogue—the picnic song—where the hero arrived during a girls' picnic and inserted himself into the group. Eventually the hero and heroine disported against a backdrop of her friends, recalling the *lila* [12] of Krishna and Radha in the forest, surrounded by *gopis* [13].

In a sense, then, anxieties around the 'modern' Indian woman dissipated out of the body of the heroine/respectable Indian woman and amalgamated around the dancing body of Helen—vamp, minority figure, sexual, international, unattached. In fact, when she did get attached, she usually met with death—separating the idea of sexual freedom from monogamy. On the one hand, this certainly laid out a dichotomy of sex which is only bodily, in the form of the vamp-dancer, and sex which is of the soul, a higher, noble kind, attached to love and carried out only after marriage, in the form of the heroine. The heroine's erotic desire was responsive in relation to a man, rather than independent and active in relation to her own body, as with Helen.

On the other hand, by habituating audiences to such a physical presence, Helen set the stage for a new type of heroine to come in the 1970s—whose body was displayed for pleasure, in bikinis or dance performances that could be termed cabaret (this is always a sexual term in India). Several ghostly bodies of dance released themselves through Helen into the bodies of future heroines like Zeenat Aman and Parveen Babi, who went on to have pre-marital sex on screen (and very obviously in their personal lives, living with their paramours openly). The decline of Helen's career and the rise of these heroines happened in a cross-fade—with Helen and Zeenat Aman meeting in the 1978 film *Don* (dir. Chandra Barot). Helen did the famous 'yeh mera dil' dance with Amitabh Bachchan, only to die at the end of it. But Zeenat Aman goes on living and in fact impersonates a dancer in the film symbolically living on as a figure, while the figure of Helen began to fade from films. Helen finally retired in 1983.

After the end of the Helen era, however, dance itself ceased to have a strong presence in Hindi films, and the staged dance, practically not at all. In part, women themselves struggled to find a strong space in film narratives, which cohered more and more around the male protagonist's quests. It was not for a few years that dance once again rose to significance in the Hindi film. This time the genie of dance slipped out of the bottle and manifested in the body of a heroine figure—Madhuri Dixit. It is not that there had not been dancing stars before. Vyjayanthimala was one of these in the 1950s. But a 'Vyjayanthimala dance' was not part of the expected repertoire of the Hindi film, as it went on to become with Madhuri Dixit.

Madhuri Dixit was trained in Kathak and entered Hindi films in the 1980s, but did not quite make a mark until 1988. When she did, it was with a dance. Playing Mohini—the avatar taken by Vishnu to lure the *asuras* [14] (trans. demons) during the *amrit manthan* [15] (churning of the ocean), symbolic of the most alluring of women—she danced on stage to the song '*Ek*, *do*, *teen*' (one, two, three). The song is watched by a group composed of solely working-class men, whom Mohini teases with raunchy steps offset by her mischievous, innocently sexy face.

This dance marks a turning point in the history of Hindi film dance for several reasons.





Madhuri Dixit in *Khalnayak* (1993) has a mischievious, girl-woman sexiness.

Madhuri Dixit and Salman Khan in the iconic song *Didi Tera Dewar Deewana* (1994).



Saroj Khan.

For the first time it presented a clear heroine figure in a dance that is chiefly sexy, and presented sexiness with a robust, bodily series of steps. From this film on, a Madhuri Dixit film meant that there had to be a Madhuri Dixit dance item in the film—and that it would involve some kind of stylized aesthetic but highly pared down, built to showcase Madhuri Dixit's special brand of Monroesque, mischievous, girl-woman sexiness along with her great skill. The songs were full of double meanings and suggestions, and winks and teasing steps: 'Choli ke peeche kya hai' (trans. What's beneath your blouse?) with its Rajasthani flavour, 'Humko, aaj kal hai intezar' (trans. Nowadays I'm always waiting) with its Koli fisherwoman style, 'Chane ke khet mein' (trans. in the chickpea fields) and 'Didi tera dewar deewana' (Sister, your brother-in-law is crazy) with their Uttar Pradesh folk roots—all of them featured much heaving of breasts, sticking out of bottoms and sinuous hip movements.

It is not, again, as if these elements had not existed earlier in Bollywood dance. But for the first time they were brought together in one body as a definable genre—what we now call Bollywood dance, where the hips were so important. In the presence of a Madhuri item, its aesthetic styling, its presentation on a stage or in a party setting, you could sense also the ghost of Helen Richardson inhabiting the frame of Madhuri Dixit.

But this was not the only ghostly body present in the dance. There was another, all too real, all too significant body—that of Saroj Khan. Saroj Khan was born Nirmala, in a poor, Partition-era family. She began working in films at the age of 3 to support her family, doing bit roles and moving on to parts as a chorus dancer. She can be spotted in a boyish outfit in one of the group dances, ironically, of



Soroj Kahn's signature steip.



Saroj Kahn recognized as a prize winning choreographer.



Fearless Nadia, stunt star of the 1930s.

Howrah Bridge (1958, dir. Shakti Samanta), Helen's breakout film. She later shifted to choreography. Saroj Khan is credited with having brought Indian bhava (trans. emotiveness), and aspects of Kathak and Indian folk back into the dance repertoire, and investing these with a contemporary, open sexiness never before seen in dances by heroines. The sexuality of her dances was very bodily, very frank, and not dependent on a hero's touch alone.

But she also has the historic credit for being the person because of whom the popular Filmfare award for choreography was instated. And when she went up to receive this award on stage, dancing the steps she had composed for Madhuri Dixit for 'Ek do teen' (trans. one two three), she became the first choreographer to be present before the audience's eyes, asserting that the body of the dancing heroine contained also the body of the choreographer. In doing this she gathered the ghosts of many forgotten worlds of dance—which had found their way into the darkened corners of Bollywood studios as dance teachers, musicians and extras—into her being, bringing these worlds to a professional place again.

Innumerable photographs exist of Saroj Khan and Madhuri Dixit together, both striking identical poses, making explicit that what dances on screen is the body of Madhuri Dixit with the ghostly body of Saroj Khan, erstwhile chorus girl, film extra/junior artist, the most marginal of figures of the screen in a Hindi film. In one sense this breaks apart the idea of Helen into two—the dancer and the dance, both embodied, separately and simultaneously. It also communicates the idea of Bollywood dance as a teachable object, breaking through the screen to reveal what went into creating those Bollywood affects, the idea that Bollywood dreams held a graspable reality which could make the dreams graspable too.

What consolidated this idea was Saroj Khan's other notable contribution to the repertoire of Hindi film dance—the signature step. Saroj Khan's choreography through the 1990s was marked by a highly identifiable signature step which she repeated along with the refrain of the song, something she developed in her work with Madhuri Dixit. From Helen to Saroj Khan, the Bollywood dance became a cinematic object. With these discrete steps, Saroj Khan offered a way for the ghosts of dancing filmi bodies to enter the bodies of real people not just in symbolic ways.

In her book *Wanted: Cultured Ladies Only*, Neepa Mazumdar interviews Girish Karnad about Fearless Nadia, the stunt star of the 1930s. He talks of how half the pleasure of watching Nadia's films lay in being able to imitate the fights and stunts afterwards. In this way cinema culture became physical culture. In this way a kind of bodily contact happened between cinema figure and audience, which altered the bodily experience of the viewer when outside the cinema hall. The cinema hall was in that sense a transgressive physical experience where one took in diverse bodies into one's own and remixed them with one's own physical language, reframing respectable bodies and mobility within and via the body. So it was that Saroj Khan's choreography and its signature step became easily imitatable.

Since they were embodied in the figure of the heroine and not the vamp, performing these dances, for middle-class and all other classes of viewers, offered



ABCD--bringing street dancers from many different backgrounds to film.



ABCD follows the TV series Dance India Dance in valorizing popular dance forms and all different body types and backgrounds of dancers.

what I would call a respectable ambiguity. Significantly, the male star Saroj Khan also worked with considerably was Govinda, who brought in a formalized street dancing aspect and persona to the Hindi film screen.

These trends in Hindi film dance swiftly found themselves established as the standard of choreography on the one hand, but even more swiftly they spilled off the screen into real life. The performance of item dances at weddings, the growth of a Bollywood dance class industry for those who wanted to sample the pleasures of formalized dance without the intensity of classical art, grew from the signature step—but also, one might also venture to say, from the joining of body and soul, sex and spirit that the Saroj Khan—Madhuri Dixit pairing brought to us.

Eventually, this ghostly movement of bodies from one to the other in a kind of positive, non-scary version of *The Shining* translated into a literal mobility of bodies. India's earliest dance competition show on television was 'Boogie Woogie', an open competition that anyone could try to enter, which showcased a nascent dance craze developing in India. It was followed by 'Nach Baliye' [16] in 2005, where real-life couples competed through choreographed dance; and 'Jhalak Dikhlaja' in 2006, based on the BBC show 'Strictly Come Dancing', which paired a choreographer with a celebrity. These shows created an appetite for dance contests, but also a literacy with dance styles and cinema choreography's use of costume, lighting and dance for viewers.

With this base, it was the 2009 show 'Dance India Dance' that significantly altered the world of Bollywood dance, and brought in that literal bodily mobility. 'Dance India Dance' was an open competition where talent was found in different cities—quite like 'Indian Idol' did for singers. Anyone who could dance could compete—and they did. The judges on the show were Bollywood choreographers, and they worked with the dancers to refine their styles. 'Dance India Dance' brought to prominence the explosion of street dance that had been taking place among working-class urban populations as well as the alumni of Bollywood dance academies. It also brought forward the dance troupe—groups of people, often of poorer backgrounds, who had honed their performances in community spaces around religious festivals like Ganpati, side by side with classically trained dancers.

In a way, every dance element that had made up Hindi film dance was available on screen as a deconstructed Bollywood dance, reconstructed before our eyes. It also made the careers of some troupes and some individual dancers. Famous among these is Raghav Juyal or Cockroaxz, who perfected a personal fusion style involving slow motion walking steps which was described as an amalgamation of being 'powerful like a crocodile and creepy like a cockroach'. Cockroaxz won season 3 of 'Dance India Dance'. He made his film debut with a small, unsuccessful film, *Sonali Cable* (trans. Sonali the cablewoman, Charudutt Acharya, 2014), but he remains a big youth icon for his story of success.

In 2013, Remo D'Souza, Bollywood choreographer and judge on the show 'Dance India Dance', made his first feature film. Titled *ABCD* (Anybody Can Dance), the film replayed the story of 'Dance India Dance'-style shows—it followed the shaky fortunes, reversals and eventual victory of a troupe of street dancers from a Mumbai slum, headed by their maverick teacher, Prabhudeva. Many of the dancers from 'Dance India Dance' featured in this film.

Produced by a prestigious studio, UTV-Disney, the film was a giant hit. More importantly, it was the first time in perhaps forty years that such a diversity of dancing bodies was featured on the A-list Indian screen—fat, thin, dark-skinned, Muslim, low-caste, male, female and, especially, working class—on par in a troupe. The film had no known faces among the dancers, which made it all the more a powerful story of success. It also had no discernible hero and heroine



Trans dance troupe, The Dancing Queens.



ABC2—gym moulded and elite bodies.

figures—though, without a doubt, men played a more prominent part in the narrative.

As screen travelled into life and life travelled back onto screen, a literal movement of bodies that do not make up the mainstream idea of the uber-body—heterosexual, upper caste and class, gym-perfect to international standards—was made possible through dance. This literal movement can also be found in a completely different space: that of a troupe of transgender performers called The Dancing Queens whose public performances are slowly gaining general popularity outside LGBTQI spaces. Abhina, the founder of the troupe, spoke movingly at a performance in Mumbai in 2016, about her transition from male to female:

'Bollywood dance gave me confidence in my body. To dance before other people and to be appreciated for something of my body made a very big difference to me.'

In a poignant moment of joining, she performed on the same stage with her mother, who had supported her transition and who had also been, before, a traditional Lavni (a courtesanal folk form of Maharashtra) dancer. On stage, then, were the many physical, social, cultural and emotional movements of bodies held by Bollywood dance.

The story of the Bollywood staged dance is a story of remixed bodies, each transforming the other, infecting each other with the body of dance. They offer us also a way to look at the history of Bollywood, not only as a history of the normative national but of marginalized pleasure, pushing its way back to centerstage, bringing with it other marginalized selves. Perhaps it also offers us a way to reconceptualize narratives of the national.

This is not to convey a single-toned account of under-class triumph. Bollywood's constant churn establishes and destabilizes simultaneously, as I have noted earlier in this essay.

The coda of the story is bittersweet: in 2015, the sequel to *ABCD* came out, as *ABCD2*. It no longer starred unknown dance performers and their varied, unprocessed bodies. Instead, the central roles had a hero and heroine, played respectively by Varun Dhawan and Shraddha Kapoor, children of film families, their bodies gym-reconstituted and elite. In these bodies, they subsumed the several bodies that had come before, of working-class dancers and their diverse bodily narratives, into a modern, consumer-friendly processed body and gendered narrative.

It is another matter that Cockroaxz also played a significant, though supporting role in the film. We will have to wait and see if some meaning is made of that, which changes the center of the stage.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. Acknowledgment: Paromita Vohra, 'Bodily Fluid: The Movement of Bollywood Dance from Body to Body', was first published in *Tilt Pause Shift: Dance Ecologies in India*, edited by Anita E. Cherian, New Delhi: Tulika Books in association with Gati Dance Forum, 2016, pp. 183-96. [return to page 1]
- 2. Bharatnatyam is an Indian classical dance indigenous to the Tamil Nadu region in India which illustrates Hindu religious and devotional themes. The name *Bharatanatyam* is derived from joining two words—'Bharata' and 'Natyam' where 'Bharata' is a mnemonic of 'bha' (Bhava) which means emotion, 'ra' (Raga) which means melody, and 'ta' (taal) which means rhythm, and 'Natyam' which means dance.

Bharatnatyam can trace its lineage to the dance form Sadir or Sadir Attam which was performed by Devadasis in royal courts, temples and other private spaces. Devasdasis were a community of female artists and dancers whose life was dedicated to serving a deity in ritual, dance and art. They were temple dancers, and later started performing in royal courts as well. The majority of dance compositions in Sadir were meant to be physical representation of the poetic texts that were usually erotic in nature. Longing, separation, and union were the core situations that characterised the poetic texts that were performed in courts, by courtesanal communities.

In the late 19th century, the Devadasi practice was banned, in a series of reforms propelled by British colonisers and upper-caste Indians, conflating Devadasi practice with to prostitution. Devadasis were caught in a web of multiple political agendas, and denoted as "vulgar" from the elite Brahminical lens. The many traditions of their dance like nautch, dasi attam and so on, were reconstructed and "modernised" into Bharatnatyam, which is now advertised as a Brahmin tradition of devotion, purity and storytelling.

- 3. Mother India is a visual personification of India that derives its iconographic attributes from the Hindu Goddess Durga, who rides a tiger and vanquishes a demon. Many pre-independence calendar art images feature images of this goddess-like figure called 'Mother India', holding in one hand a burning torch (Amar Jyoti or the eternal flame in remembrance of heroic sacrifice), and in the other, the national flag. Her golden halo and lion companion ('vehicle') aligned her semiotically with the goddess Durga, though she had but two arms and carried no weapons. She is often pictured silhouetted against the map of India, its outline filled out by mountains and lakes, forest and flowers, signaling a sovereign India, freed from British rule (the mother-land). Post-independence the idea of India as Bharat Mata (Mother India) remains and is often used in nationalist discourse, offering a continuity between the idea of the Indian woman as a mother-goddess, pure and caring of the nation's sons.
- 4. A full-length, gathered skirt, usually worn by women, in different regions of South Asia and often decorated with embroidery, colourful laces and small

mirrors.

5. A gharara, also known as *bara paincha* (12-paneled) is a garment born in the Indian Islamicate culture, mostly in Northern India. It consists of a kurti (a short, mid-thigh length tunic), a dupatta (veil), and a pair of wide-legged pants, flared at the knees. They are usually made of silk brocade and elaborately embroidered. Ghararas originated in the princely states of Awadh (within modern-day Uttar Pradesh) and were popular among North-Indian Muslim women of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Women characters in what were known as Muslim socials, Bollywood films set in an entirely Muslim social milieu, often wore ghararas to signal their aristocratic culture. In contemporary times, ghararas are most commonly worn for weddings or on major festivals like Eid.

6. Launched as an extension to the Social Purity Movement in India in the late 19th century (the 1890s), the Anti-nautch movement abolished many Indian dance practices, inleuding the *Devadasi* practice.

The term Devadasi means 'servant of god' refers to the community of female dancers in South India. The Devadasi practice followed marrying pre-pubescent girls to the temple deity in a ceremony called *pottukattal*, (tying the holy thread). Once a girl became a devadasi, she started training in the dance form called Sadir Attam. They used to perform in temples, royal courts, and at private soirees of the elite classes, often held on occasions such as marriages. Each of these contexts had its own set of dance and music compositions, though there was also a natural overlap, and technique and texts could sometimes be transferred from one context to another. Different names were given to these dancers depending on which occasion they performed on, such as the *Alankara Dasis* who performed at weddings and other ceremonies and *Rajadasis* who danced at royal functions. They were the most important ritual performers and no festive occasion was complete in the temple without the performance of the temple girls.

The "anti-nautch" movement began in South India as a struggle for the middle-class to orient all women in the service of the home and nation, and autonomy was looked on with suspicion. The restriction of women's lifestyle choices to Victorian sexual norms also resonated deeply with indigenous Brahmanical patriarchy. By the 1920s, the anti-nautch movement had reached its peak, and many devadasis were forced out of their homes and into urban rehabilitation centres that tried to "domesticate" them. The movement that started with a struggle to domesticate the *devadasis* in the south, later spread to the *tawaifs* of the northern region of colonial India, and also sought to sanitise manifestations of the erotic and queer in Indian culture.

7. Ghazal is a genre of lyric poem, featuring five to fifteen autonomous couplets, typically dealing with themes of love, longing, melancholy, metaphysical questions, mysticism, devotion and often sung by Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani musicians. The form has roots in seventh-century Arabia, and gained prominence in the thirteenth and fourteenth century with Persian poets as Rumi and Hafez.

Each line of the poem must be of the same length. The first couplet introduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain. Subsequent couplets pick up the same scheme in the second line only, repeating the refrain and rhyming the second line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet's signature, referring to the author in the first or third person, and frequently including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning.

Traveling from Persia, the ghazal found a permanent home in India where it is sometimes traced to the 13th century in the works of Amir Khusrau. Its Urdu incarnation is identified in the work of Mohammad Quli Qutub Shah towards the latter half of the 16th century, and Vali Deccani in the 17th century.

- 8. Tawaif is a female entertainer who is well versed in the arts of poetry, singing, dancing, music, and etiquette. Sometimes caste-based professions, patronised by the dominant castes and landed elites, such performance communities were differently known in different parts of Indian, for instance, *devadasis* in the South, *baijis* in Bengal, and *naikins* or *kalavantins* in Goa. Often called "nautch girls" during British rule, their profession was conflated with prostitution in the late 19th century as part of purity movements and colonial law.
- 9. Mujrah is a dance form that emerged to entertain the Mughal royalty in precolonial India that incorporated elements of Kathak dance on music such as thumri, Dadra, ghazal or poems. The word 'Mujra' actually means to pay respect. The respect is paid to the audience in the form of dance. With the decline of performance communities due to purity movements, alongside the decline of the old princely states and landed elites due to changes wrought by the British colonial system, mujrah was performed more vestigeally in red-light districts and remained a popular dance item in Bollywood films until the 1980s. Mujrah song-sequences preserved the cultural memory of the tawaif and also reflected the knowledge and skills of the tawaifs which partly shaped the song and dance elements of early sound cinema.
- 10. The Vedic term *Ganpati* which means 'guardian of the multitudes' is another name for the Hindu deity Ganesha. Ganesh Chaturthi is a Hindu 10-day festival that celebrates the birth of the elephant-headed deity Ganesha, son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. The festival is observed on the fourth day (Chaturthi) of the Hindu month of Bhadra (August-September). It begins with the installation of clay idols of Lord Ganesha either in homes or in pandals (outdoor tents/sheds). On the last day of the festival, the clay idols are carried to local water bodies in a huge musical procession accompanied by a huge crowd, chanting, dancing and singing. Then the idols are immersed in the water, a ritual known as *visarjan* with the hope that the Lord Ganesha will come back again. The festival celebrates Lord Ganesha as the god of new beginnings and the remover of obstacles (vighnaharta) as well as the god of wisdom and intelligence. [return to page 2]
- 11. An annual 9-day Hindu festival that celebrates the victory of the Goddess Durga over the buffalo-demon Mahishasur. Mahishasura was a buffalo-demon who won a boon of immortality whereby no man or God could kill him. Mahishasur, with such power, unleashed a reign of terror on earth and with his army of asuras defeated gods. To end this, all the three most powerful gods of the pantheon—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva—came together to create a powerful force—Shakti who is known as Goddess Durga. With 10 arms, each with a weapon (a chakra, a trishul, a thunderbolt, a sword, a flame and more) and riding on a lion, Durga fought with Mahishasur for 10 days, slaying him on the last. Those 9 days are celebrated as Durga puja, at the advent of autumn, especially in the eastern states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Assam, Bihar, and Tripura. The festival centralises the presence of women, fertility, art, food, dance and domesticity.
- 12. A divine play or dance of divine love. The word is also described in the sense of "playfulness" as well as "drama" or theatre. It also refers to the revelational displays or dramatic manifestations of the various divine events in the life of Krishna where he attracts the milkmaids away from their homes, into the forest, where they play out their love and passion in the midst of nature.
- 13. A married or unmarried cowherdess or milkmaid most commonly referred to in connection with the god Krishna, and depicted as surrounding him with love and dance and desire in mythological narratives. The love of Krishna with Radha, a married gopi, is celebrated as the apogee of spiritual union and typifies the ardour of Bhakti and Sufi relationships with God, where the devotee is often referred to as female, the god as male, and love described as romantic and sexual

as well as devotional and spiritual - the two becoming metaphors of each other as a way of connoting absolute submission to the divine being and divine love.

- 14. Though often conflated with the word demon, in Hindu mythology, asuras are actually beings defined by their opposition to the devas or suras (gods).
- 15. Amrit Manthan/Samudra Manthan (Churning of the Ocean Milk) is an event in Puranic mythology where the devas (gods) and asuras (demigods), who are traditionally opponents, churn the ocean in order to obtain the Amrit (elixir of life/immortality) from the celestial ocean of milk. Numerous magical objects and magical beings emerge, including the sun and the moon. When the nectar finally emerges, the gods trick the asuras and steal it away. The Churning of the Ocean is seen as rich with symbolism of the spiritual churn within, with metaphors for consciousness, desire, self-interest, asceticism, relational harmony, contradictions of human nature and so on.
- 16. Nach Baliya (2005) is an original Indian, Hindi language dance reality show by Star India where real-life celebrity couples compete with each other in a dance battle. In 2005, Star One (channel by Star Group) announced Nach Baliye, which was also open to the celebrities who were married to non-public figures, became an overnight success and a popular franchise among TV audiences.
- 17. *Jhalak Dikhlaja* (2006) is an Indian dance reality T.V. show and the spin-off of BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*/ABC's *Dancing With The Stars* where celebrities from various fields team up with professional dances to compete.

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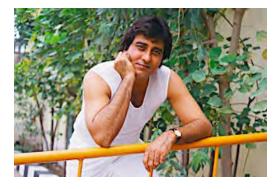


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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



My aunt said Dharmendra was a "he-man" because he was hairy.



Vinood Khanna, with easy masculinity.

Automatic bodies: masculinities, mobilities, nation, and the Bollywood body

by Paromita Vohra

A rare moments of genuinely transgressive thrill while watching a contemporary Hindi film happened for me in the 2010 film *Rajneeti* (trans. Politics, dir. Prakash Jha). In one scene, the actor Ranbir Kapoor is in the shower. We can see his back, and then, he turns around. I gasped. My companion asked me what happened. "He has hair on his chest!" I exclaimed.

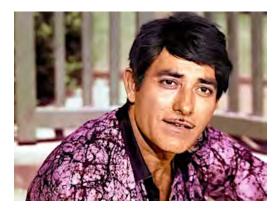
A male chest with hair on it has now become so absent from the landscape of bodies in Bollywood, that this altogether natural sight, seemed almost forbidden, erotic in some unregulated way. It is not a sight that has since repeated itself on the mainstream screen as far as I know.

The man with hair on his chest, his testosterone abundantly on display, has always been one of the traditional symbols of masculinity. I remember a conversation I had with my aunt and a friend of hers, in the 1980s. They would both have been about 70 at the time. They both said how much they had always loved the actor Dharmendra. "That's how a man should be" said my aunt, with a big grin, adding, "he-man, with hair on his chest." I remember laughing at this. By then, the idea of a "He-man" was already a cartoon idea, a throwback to a notion of masculinity that did not fit with changing notions of contemporary, feminist femininity.

We had begun to locate a man's attractiveness not so much in conventional physical good looks, as in some intangible quality of sexiness or appeal. The rising stars of the time were the three Khans of today (Shah Rukh Khan, Amir Khan, Salman Khan), and they were all at the time, boyish, carefree, not in the He-man mold at all.

In some ways though, the conversation contained ideas of masculine appeal that had co-existed on the Hindi film screen. There had always been traditionally masculine and also beautiful men in Hindi films. They had been popular male stars too—Dharmendra, famous for his manly thighs; Vinod Khanna, lusted after for his easy masculine build and liquefied good looks; Raaj Kumar's haughty hotness; even a young Premnath's heavy lidded, full-lipped sensuality. But these stars had never quite reigned over the national consciousness. It may be a fanciful thought, but it was almost as if their beauty was a limitation.

The position of reigning stars, went to actors whose appeal lay in a certain persona, which did not require a traditional masculine physique. Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand all being examples of big stars, whose appeal lay in their emotive force as idealistic, noble or conflicted figures dealing with social and



Raaj Kumar, haughty hotness.



Raj Kapoor, emotive force rather than traditional masculine physique.



Dara Singh, former wrestler, star of B-grade films.

national value systems.

On-screen masculinity could even accommodate the decidedly not-good looking men like Pradeep Kumar and Rajendra Kumar whose appeal is mysterious, or perhaps lies in their being absolutely unthreatening as sex-appeal ciphers, bodies who are present, but have no real bodily presence.

The muscular man appeared briefly in films—the actor Prithviraj Kapoor, who reportedly went to *akhadas* (trans. wrestling arena) to build his body had been an important star. But, on the whole muscular men symbolized the rustic and the foot-soldier, for instance Dara Singh, famed wrestler who became a movie star, but never graduated above a certain B-grade film. The depiction of the muscled man also ranged from the humorous to the contemptuous in song sketches or comedic interludes playing on a brain versus brawn dichotomy. The brain was needed to both survive in a new and changing India as well as to build a new India in the role of (of course, male) engineers, doctors and managers. To imagine a new nation called India into being, called for the mind and spirit, not the body, for the hero of mainstream Hindi cinema. The Nehruvian hero lay not in the villages or in traditional vocabularies of masculinity, but in urban, developing India.

In a sense, in this world, beauty was not the work of men—nor was the appreciation of and intoxication with male beauty the work of idealized women. Men did not have to appeal to anyone—woman or man—on the basis of their appearance. Rather, they operated at a 'higher' level as embodying a set of qualities related to honor, community, family, and a series of behaviors and attitudes, not physical attributes. The women they deserved were beautiful but willing to recast their spiritedness into noble companions in support of these men.

It was not until the appearance of Shammi Kapoor in the 1960s that a hero whose presence was strongly physical appeared. His cavorting and physical shenanigans signaled youthful abandon, a liberation of sorts from the traditional male aura of contained responsibility that had preceded him. Shammi Kapoor's rock-and-roll recklessness and campy posturing before camera to show it his best side opened out a narrative of male beauty for female appreciation as also, however unstated, for queer appreciation. It provided a hero who was willing to make a new kind of woman—mischievous, light-hearted, consuming the bodily pleasures of fashion and bicycles and cars, while also acquiring an English-medium education and so, able to say, "Oh you shut up"—the focus of his attention. This set the stage for the mannerisms and simpering flirtations of Rajesh Khanna, who became a blowout romantic sensation in the 1970s, leading Shobhaa De (then Rajadhyaksha) to coin the term 'superstar' to describe his cultural status.

This was followed by the very differently textured reign of Amitabh Bachchan, where body was not unimportant, but masculinity still lay in brooding, smoldering, lonely quests and emotional self-denial. The body might exhibit strength—defeating villains in fistfights—and it may partake of physical pleasures—as in the famous post-coital cigarette scene with Parveen Babi in *Deewar* (trans. The Wall, 1975, dir. Yash Chopra). But it remained emotionally under-nourished, making do with Zohra Bais while longing for Paro and Ma in an extended performance of the *Devdas* figure. [1] [open endotes in new window]

Something changed dramatically for Bollywood men in the 1990s. If there is an



Shah Rukh Khan *Dilwale Dulhaniya* reefining



Shammi Kapoor—"male beauty for female appreciation and also, however unstated, for queer appreciation."

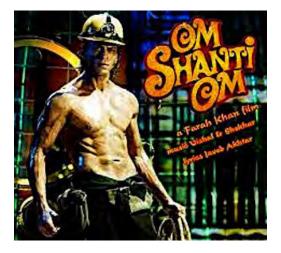
iconic moment of this change, it is in the 1998 film, *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (dir. Sohail Khan) where Salman Khan sang and danced shirtless on a stage, in the song "O o Jaane Jana" (trans. O Beloved). Not only did he unveil here, a new muscled body. It was also a hairless body, every single hair waxed neatly, shiningly off it. In this film, Salman Khan reprised a role he had played more than once, including in his hit debut film *Maine Pyar Kiya* (trans. I have Loved, 1989, dir. Sooraj Barjatya). He is a rich, urban young man from the city who always falls for a more traditional, girl, more 'rooted' in the small-town or semi-rural. In order to win her, he must prove himself to her male relatives—father, brother.

While Shah Rukh Khan's persona was doing the same thing in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (trans. The Big-Hearted Will Take the Bride, 1995, dir. Aditya Chopra) through the re-defining of love, Salman Khan must do in his films by proving that he is capable of hard, physical labor. It is like a reverse-migration of the Indian metropolitan film hero, from the world of mind and spirit, also urban material prosperity, to the hinterland and to the body. Salman Khan must show he is a real man, capable of supporting a woman, by using his body to survive and succeed in the world.

Salman Khan also played out a parallel narrative in real life, where he built up his body into its current muscular form. It is as if the narrative persona that he inhabited on-screen, and the being he sculpted through and elaborate, dedicated physical regimen came together to become one in *Pyaar Kiya Toh Darna Kya* (trans. Why Fear if You Love Someone?, 1998, dir. Sohail Khan), creating a powerful symbol of the man hitherto not taken seriously, re-embodied as a new male ideal in globalized India. The built body, born from body-building culture presented the idea that there was apparently no natural order of things. The natural—the body—could be converted into the appropriate ideal for a new version of India taking shape in post-globalization years.

Body building culture was not new in India. It had been variously articulated in the 1930s and 1940s. The Hindu right wing's *vyayamshala* [2] (trans. gymnasium) culture focused on physical strength for the soldier of Hindutva. The *akharas* were a traditional space of masculine brotherhood and identity, a whole way of life. Exercise clubs were created for the health improvement of the children of workers (Mazdoor Welfare Associations [3]). Physical Education or PT was incorporated into school curricula. In Mumbai, this bodybuilding culture took strong root in working class areas—chawls and slums—across religions, and it became an important mobilizing space for political organizations, too. Bodybuilding contests became an important way for young men, struggling to gain a foothold in an inimical economic and cultural context, as a way to establish a sense of public life and importance.

This working class, somewhat disenfranchised, universe of bodybuilding gained mainstream visibility through the figures of the actors Sanjay Dutt and Salman Khan. It has gone on to become the lingua franca for the body in the new globalized economy of India—as much as beauty contests had become for women. A body of this sort has ceased to be optional. To show that you are able to resculpt your body is a rite of passage often carried out publicly in order to prove your eligibility for success. Actor's Hrithik Roshan, Sonu Sood, Varun Dhawan have all articulated this narrative in the public relations narratives generated in media. Occasionally women actresses too have done so—Kareena Kapoor's much publicized acquisition of a size zero figure, as later Parineeti Chopra's new body,



Shah Rukh Kahn also re-created his body for this film in which the dance sequences flaunted his abs and his open pants belt.



Salman Khan built up his body, then it was used to sell the film like this. Six-pack abs from the gym symbolize the new male ideal in globalized india.

become a visible narrative of how changing your body could change your destiny.

For any new idea to seize the imagination of a public, it has to resonate in deeper ways. The built body, its language of cuts and trims, its cultivated hairlessness provide an interesting sense of democracy. These replicable, standardized bodies function in to our times as a college degree once did in another. A qualification for entry into the economy of media visibility, which represents the facsimile of success. In that sense we could call it the 'Automatic Body'—a technology we imagine will automatically guarantee entry into the dream of India shining, moving, growing.

It holds out the idea of automatic success—get the body to get the mobility. In some ways it is like the dream of English, sold by Chetan Bhagat: Get English, get high-paying jobs and economic mobility.

Can a body have an accent? Perhaps body language is the accent of the body, marking us as being from a place, a way of being. We carry whole histories of *desiness* [4] in the way we sit, stand and move. The new gym-created body automatically irons out every inflection of bodily identity by creating identical bodies through an identical process, all speaking the same body-language.

Like the call-center voice, free of MTI—Mother Tongue Inflection—so the constructed male body is symbolically free of its origin, of regional inflection once expressed by, say, Bachchan in songs like "Khaike paan Banaras wala." That is also why these bodies must be waxed even though the people in these bodies are not body builders who need to display muscle definition. The hair symbolizes that unruly naturalness of individual difference that we have to pretend does not exist in order to pretend we are all equal, even if we are not.

As an aside, this cleaned-up replicable body is something that Bollywood itself has symbolically acquired through a voluble public story of how it has cleansed itself of black money and unruliness. It is apparently a new, uninflected Bollywood symbolized by the mental-gymnasium-generated bound script. Streamlined through corporatization into replicable success formulae.

The body becomes quite literall, a glistening, well-oiled machine in globalized India, one whose brute strength and muscularity are smoothed out into hairless metrosexuality. The urban male subsumes the idea of the working class and small-town male in this bodily figure, presenting a logic of sameness that nevertheless erases the true diversity of Indian class and caste.

Today this bodily demonstration must be carried out as a norm for ordinary people and superstars alike. Even actors whose stardom did not reply on a body type have had to do it. Amir Khan in *Ghajini* (2008, dir. A.R. Murugadoss) had to recreate his body with his typical moral earnestness while Shah Rukh Khan has done it with his trademark irony in *Om Shanti Om's* (2007, dir. Farah Khan) famous six-pack. Hairlessness is important but, in some ways, it is as if chest hair has been replaced by the six pack, visibly displayed to signal masculinity.

No story is ever so unitary of course and there are other intertwined narratives ongoing, disrupting these normative rhythms.

For instance in the parallel trajectories of figures like John Abraham, emerging through modeling contests, the body is presented as something for visual pleasure and beauty also—the metrosexual body and also the queer body, opening up a discussion of homosexual attractiveness not much publicly discussed otherwise. Hairlessness is also an essential ingredient of this body, both to evoke youth and softness along with the masculinity of muscles. This body is far more fluid in appearance and meaning and becomes joined more easily into mainstream comfort levels.

Does this mean the male figure is more sexualized and also accommodates female pleasure? In some ways yes—the male body now certainly carries more sexual meaning. But it is a showcase meaning—an aspirational acquisition, more for looking than touching. We rarely see bodies touching and emotions connecting in films. Most dances are frontally choreographed for display, evoking the thought of "I'm too sexy for you, main *tere paas na aani"* (song: "Sheela ki Jawani," in the film *Tees Maar Khan*, 2010, dir. Farah Khan). [translate the phrase inside the text, the song title, the film title] The body is more display than play.

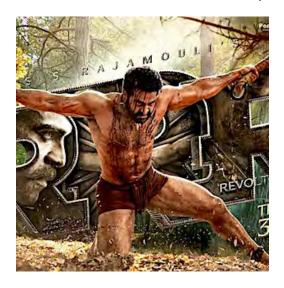
Here, all sweat is good sweat, dutifully acquired in the collective environs of the gym. Private sweat is bad sweat and must be deodorized. This desexualized narrative is also present in gossip column tales of how couples gym together, more playmates than lovers. Bipasha Basu and John Abraham were in fact a poster-couple for this body culture, objectified, but desexualized.

As Hindi films have increasingly ceased to be about any but an aspirational middle class or Non Resident Indians (NRIs), other kinds of bodies have automatically vanished from the screen even in minor roles, last seen in Ram Gopal Varma's underworld films and now reserved for a cut-and-paste notion of 'realism' in Bollywood indies and advertising. This realism is always described as gritty—as if the visual evidence of diverse castes and classes were in fact grit in our eyes, or dirt.

On the other hand, the primacy of the body, has strongly been represented in dance and the rise of dance shows on television have ushered in diverse bodies—fat, thin, tall, short, wheatish and dark—and created entry into the media economy for people of diverse backgrounds.

The film *ABCD* (Anybody Can Dance, Remo D'Souza, 2013), set in the culture of street dance, and drawing on the talent of these shows, brought this dazzling diversity of bodies to the screen after a long time, and was a stand-out hit. In its sequel, *ABCD2* (Remo D'Souza, 2015), these diverse bodies were replaced by the more Automatic Bodies (as also pedigreed bodies, both offspring of parents with movie careers) of Varun Dhawan and Shraddha Kapoor.

A most telling disruption of this bodily narrative appeared as a by-product of the film *Sairat* (2016, Nagraj Manjule), a love story about caste conflict and violence with a primarily rural backdrop. The film was a staggering hit, foregrounding caste in mainstream discussion for a while. A song from the film, *Zingat* (data),



aggressively local, drawing from frenzied dhol [5] music rhythms, demanding an abandoned, not regimented style, became a super hit, resulting, as super hit songs do, in several remixes and video mashups.

One of the most successful of these was a Hindi film mash up. But to put it together effectively, it drew on film bodies from the 1980s—Mithun Chakraborty, Govinda and even Bachchan. Accented bodies, with accented moves, were necessary to match the rhythms of a less constrained music. For a few minutes they broke through the Automatic Body façade of the present, with a memory of bodies that had been and still exist, unrepresented on the global Hindi screen.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Sunny Leone's amazing grace: on what it means for a porn star to be a mainstream movie star

by Paromita Vohra

There's a curiously distant feeling, about the rise and rise of Bollywood actress Sunny Leone [1] [open endnotes in new window] from the time she entered Indian households via Colors' TV show "Bigg Boss Season 5" in 2012 to April 2015 when her film *Ek Paheli Leela* (transl. Leela, a Riddle, 2015) became a hit. Soon after, she topped the *Times of India*'s list of most desirable female stars, ahead of A-listers Deepika Padukone and Katrina Kaif—no small achievement. Yet, her success feels blandly numerical, with none of the visible cultural resonance that accompanies the rise of a new star.



Bigg Boss Season 5," Mumbai reality TV show (2012) that first introduced Leone (foreground) into Indian households.



Respectable "A-list" female star Deepika Padukone, pushed down the "most desirable" list by Sunny Leone.

On consideration, it becomes apparent that this feeling arises from a certain invisibility of Leone's fandom. The number of fans of her various Facebook pages total about 1.5 million. Yet, while images and videos earn plenty of likes, there are hardly any comments on posts. The media compounds this by constantly reporting on her with reference to her past work as a porn star or, as she prefers to call it, adult entertainment professional, thus providing no fresh persona—a Sunny Leone of the Hindi films, distinct from her earlier avatar.

Ok, let me not beat around the bush. Let me just come right out and say what I feel. Sunny Leone is one of the most boring performers I've ever watched. I fast forwarded my way through two of her porn films, so tedious and mechanical was their spreadsheet porn-sex. Her hit song, "Baby Doll" may be catchy, but visually it is so leaden that I have never been able to watch its video through to the end, not even for the purposes of this piece. As for *Ek Paheli Leela*, despite my love of kitschy reincarnation dramas [come on, I'm Indian. I grew up on Amar Chitra Katha art. I loved both the reincarnation dramas, *Karz* (transl. The Debt, 1980)



The "adult entertainment artist's" "past work in pornography." Leone "refuses to be imprisoned or limited by a past identity."

and *Madhumati* (1958)], I found it very easy to take my eyes off Ms. Leone when she was on screen. There's nothing offensive about her. In fact, she is somewhat sweet. There's just nothing riveting about her.



Sunny Leone's additional vocation as a pop singer. Music videos, usually but not always attached to imminent film releases and "picturized" by film stars, constitute a major media genre in India. No one cares that the performers are almost never the singers and are always dubbed by members of another star subgenre, the "playback singer."

When I discussed this with a male friend, he joked, "Well obviously. You're a straight woman." But, as a dedicated viewer of porn, he admitted in the next breath that he wasn't a fan of Ms. Leone's adult videos as they were "typical *Amriki* (transl. American) porn. Too plastic for me."

So, the real mystery of Sunny Leone is not how an adult entertainment artist has crossed over, with such success, to a mainstream entertainment space in India. The real mystery is, how did someone so completely unremarkable on screen, possessed of such limited charisma, achieve this?

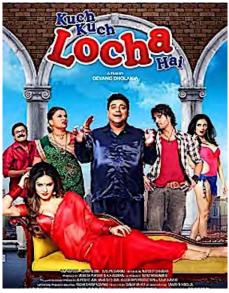
One of the reasons particular stars achieve ascendency at particular moments in history is because they somehow embody the social rhythms and cultural tendencies that are still taking shape around us. They represent the gestalt of a moment—some essence of larger social experience and aspiration that have not yet been fully recognized. Often, the "official," elite culture does not have space, vision or the means to recognize these new feelings, these still-forming quicksilver selves. What is this sense that Sunny Leone captures through her success?



Poster for *Ek Paheli Leela* (2015), the reincarnation melodrama that was Leone's first

Bollywood major "hit." The Mumbai star system is so confident that publicity materials often do not bother including the stars' names.







Three major films featuring Leone show the generic range of her vehicles: the erotic horror film sequel *Ragini* MMS 2 (2014); the comedy *Kuch Kuch Locha Hai* (Some are flexible, 2015); and *Raees* (Noble, 2017). In this political melodrama, Leone is paired with Shah Rukh Khan, one of the biggest stars in world film history.



Oshiwara, the Mumbai suburb that the author characterizes as the "noir-ish warren" of thousands of aspirants to "sexy body" ambitions.

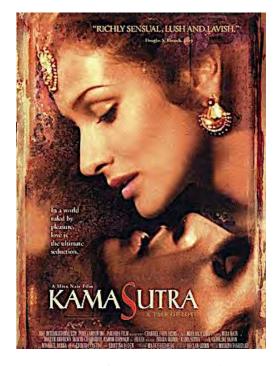
I somewhat missed Sunny Leone's entry into Indian living rooms via "Bigg Boss Season 5" because I was deep in the bowels of television production myself, working on a somewhat arty reality TV show. Called "Connected Hum Tum" (transl. You-Me, Connected, 2013), the show hoped to track the inner lives of contemporary urban women in India. The process of choosing characters involved meeting literally hundreds of women from varied backgrounds. Many of these were suburban or small-town women who wanted to make it in show business.

They had no real connections, training, or frankly, talent. But they were bursting with a kind of unchanneled assertiveness, a strong need to "show the world what I am." They did not want to be constrained by older identities of family, community or caution. Chetan Bhagat, [1a] a bestselling Indian author, speaks for many young men like this. He has frequently suggested (however disingenuously) that they can shrug off the limitations of feudal India, with the leveler of the English language.

What do these young women feel they have as a leveler, given that they come with no other advantages? It is their bodies. These young women represent the idea of show business not as a place of ephemeral, alchemical talent, but a labor market where you can acquire a suitable body, which will be employable. In the noir-ish warren of gyms, dance classes and auditions that is Oshiwara [suburban Mumbai neighborhood], thousands of aspirants apply themselves to this endeavor. Having a sexy body is now not a sign of your immorality, but your professionalism and ambition. Hence, "compro" or compromise— of some sexual nature, is also looked



Sarnia, Ontario, the petro-chemical industrial centre across the river from Michigan, where Leone's Sikh-Canadian family brought her up. She still speaks Canadian English on Hindi talk shows!



Poster for *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (Mira Nair, 1996), a recent feature film recycling of the ancient Sanskrit text of erotic education.

at far more pragmatically. They have rephrased the body, from a symbol of honor and morality to an instrument of work and progress, of the entrepreneurial self. To a certain elite eye, these young people represent vulgarity and desperation. Their "indecent" aspiration finds little recognition—unlike the "decent" MBA style aspirations of Bhagat's following.

It is innumerable young men and women like this that Sunny Leone, with her surgically, impersonally perfect body and her matter-of-fact approach to it as her skill set epitomizes. Coming from an immigrant family[2] that has left its roots to search for a better life, she represents this same unsentimental immigration which thousands of young lower-middle class Indians undertake—one which searches for new destinations, not permanent belonging, and refuses to be imprisoned or limited by a past identity.

Because of her past work in pornography, it's easy to place Sunny Leone at the cusp of India's "combination of prurient prudishness and genuine tolerance" and suggest that she is a "walking talking double meaning," as the writer Kai Friese recently did in the *New York Times*.[3] This is the kind of truism about Indian culture that we are now used to hearing from liberal elders. That India, the land of the, yawn, *Kama Sutra*,[4] has fallen into a state of sexual hypocrisy.

Double meanings can only be a source of contempt if we believe that meanings are or should be single. This belief in a linear truth or identity, which only allows you to be one thing at one time, which chooses to fix or "expose" you, is a deeply moralistic one. Whether coming from the left or the right, it is the judgmental gaze that shames people for their desires. You can do this from the left by talking about how Sunny Leone exemplifies Indian hypocrisy where porn stars become rich while LGBT+ rights are denied. You can do it from the right by raving about depravity. The purpose of this gaze, this *nazar* (transl. sight, surveillance and attention) from either direction is to shame you for routine human aspirations. It is in fact a classically pornographic gaze, seeking always to expose and demean you, metaphorically.

As both a performer and producer of pornography, Sunny Leone understands this gaze well and knows not only how to counter it, but how to invert it.

Her master-stroke, consciously or unconsciously was to appear on "Bigg Boss," the ultimate mainstream pornographic vehicle, where apparently "decent" people reveal their dark and "indecent" selves. Except, she did a complete reversal—an apparently "indecent" character came on the show and revealed her niceness, her, as one YouTube clip calls it, "cute-bhara" (transl. full of cuteness) self. She was courteous, soft-spoken and all family values: "Bahut accha lagta hai jab sab pyaar dete hain mummy daddy ko, hai na? (transl. It feels nice to love your parents, right?) I miss my parents, but they're watching from above." She made rotis (Indian bread), hung out in track pants and told Amar Upadhyay (an Indian TV actor) off for being handsy ("he is married and so am I"), sending out the message that she decides the terms of use when it came to her body, as any person should.

Through this vehicle she established a narrative that no one is defined by only one part of their identities. Yes, she is a porn star, but she is also a professional and a nice person. She established that these childish polarities of good and bad simply did not apply. To some this is a double meaning. To many it is just the normal complexity of all our lives where we are many different things at the same time. It was a much needed message, and people responded to it fervently.



"Splitsvilla" an Indian MTV dating reality show launched in 2008 and hosted by Sunny Leone since 2014.

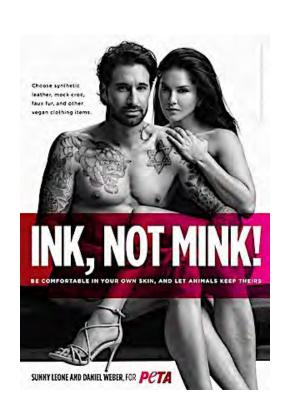
For instance Scarlett Rose, a Mumbai based bikini model and "Splitsvilla" [5] contestant, told Anushree Majumdar who profiled Leone for *Indian Express*:

"Sunny... is one of my role models. It's not easy to be a bikini model; people think you're a porn artist. When I heard that Sunny was hosting the show, I felt that here was somebody who would understand my line of work." [6]

Unlike Rose, Leone never speaks of being a porn star with even a hint of apology. On the contrary she takes pride in her self-made identity. With practiced yet never fake ease, she never submits to the attempts at shaming implicit in many interviewers' questions. She refuses to submit to the hierarchies by which people establish themselves as acceptable by differentiating themselves from "inferior" others, as Rose does here (I'm not a porn star. I'm a bikini model) or Rakhi Sawant, another Indian actress has (I've not done pole dancing like Sunny Leone). [7] She slipped up once in an early interview by saying "a porn star is not a prostitute," [8] but never again has she resorted to such stereotyping.

Leone never offers a victim narrative. She owns her work completely and emphasizes that it has always been her choice and no one ever forced her. She also never resorts to bad mouthing or stereotyping Indian culture, which many Indians do in order to set themselves as "modern," apart from other "natives."

In an interview with *MensXP* when asked for her response to Ekta Kapoor's (an Indian TV and film director) comment that India is a sex-starved country, Leone replied that she doesn't think India is a sex-starved nation. She adds that she wouldn't say that about any country. If *Ekta Kapoo*rfeels that way then Kapoor is entitled to her opinion.[9] Leone has laughed at euphemistic questions by saying



A recent wrinkle in Sunny Leone's career has been her social activism. Ad says: Be comfortable in your own skin and let animasls keep theirs.

Bollywood megastar Salman Khan, a defender of Leone's reputation.

she receives mail regularly from women as well as couples on how to improve their sex life. She said in one video interview: "Sex isn't something crazy. It happens every day, guys!" [10]

By doing this Leone acknowledges a whole other narrative of contemporary Indian sexuality—not the old one of repression and moral policing, but one of a great deal more sexual mobility. In fact, part of Leone's relatively easy transition to the mainstream is because of the ubiquity of pornography for urban and small-town Indians thanks to the digital sphere. Indians ranks 5th highest of daily visitors to Pornhub and 4th highest in accessing it from mobile devices.[11] Given this fact, the transition of a body from the pornographic to the cinematographic space is not really so startling. It is traveling from the private to the public space, sure, but it is also traveling from one everyday space to another one.

Leone also never falls into any other cultural stereotyping. When asked in another interview what she thought about excessive violence against women in India, she said merely that this (violence) is applicable to any country in the world. "If our teachers and parents teach us differently the message will go out," she adds. [12]

The Leslee Udwins[13] and the right-wing moralizers sure could take this leaf out of Leone's book!

So, Sunny Leone is the "Other" NRI (Non Resident Indian). The one no one talks about and the one the Prime Minister doesn't address. The one who isn't ashamed of India and carries no post-colonial burdens. She speaks well for those other Indians who make a complex interweave of private and public self, of where they are coming from and where they want to go, to create a life for themselves, rather than constantly engage in defining the idea of India.

Despite all this non-denominational journey of individuality, Leone, in what may seem like hypocrisy to some and dexterity to others (like myself), never challenges basic traditional niceties. Consider, that she arrived on "Bigg Boss" the way most women arrive in their sasurals (husbands/in-laws house)—in a doli. (bridal palanquin). The other F word is big in her vocabulary—Family. She spoke of Ekta Kapoor and Pooja Bhatt, her first producers, as treating her like family. Her earthy immigrant Punjabi background was reassuring. She speaks respectfully of her parents (as indeed of all people). Her demeanour is winning—I found myself quite in love after watching many of her intelligent, confident, always courteous interviews. She does not challenge family structures—and this is very crucial for success in India, because the family, no matter what you do in it, is still the primary social unit for our culture.

Her very frontalized partnership with her husband also makes Indians comfortable. It allows the actor Salman Khan to say about her:

"Unka kaam hai - Jo bhi hai unke family mein kuch aitraaz nahin hai." (transl. It's her work, whatever she does, her family—read, husband—doesn't object.)[14]

The idea of a woman not connected to anyone is one Indians continue to find dangerous, unnerving. It is a reminder of the goddess unbound and makes people nervous. A woman who belongs with a man allows people to accept much more. Unlike actresses like Rakhi Sawant, Mallika Sherawat or Sherlyn Chopra who have inhabited the twilight zones between mainstream respectability and soft porn, Leone is not interested in directly speaking up about the patriarchy or social injustice, as much as swimming past it like a quick fish.

While Leone definitely signifies a break from certain past identities and modes, she is also part of a certain continuity. A porn professional today is only the contemporary extension of how women usually entered the film industry in the

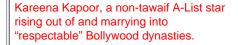


1990s Bollywood megastar Tabu (right) plays a tawaif in the latest migrant Indian TV series, the British *A Suitable Boy* (2020).

past—sometimes from the world of *tawaifs*[15] or bar-dancing communities and certainly through arduous trysts with casting couches. This belonged to a time when people entered the film industry from mixed backgrounds and remade themselves too. When the film industry was the location of so much miscegenation.

But today, families and businesses have been around for two or three generations and words like pedigree and legacy which were meaningless before are bandied about. Second and third generation *filmi* families have made part—but not the whole—of the industry respectable for their daughters to inhabit, and some other women like them, from elite social backgrounds. Corporatization has provided a finishing patina. The bodies of 21st-century actresses Deepika Padukone, Kareena Kapoor et al. carry a different meaning than heroine's bodies in the past. Any respectability one claimed came from the division of whether you played heroineor vamp, but it was a tenuous one.







Emraan Hasmi, actor inhabiting the "B-World" of lower-budget genre studios.

However, the barrier that once existed between the heroine and the vamp has now been recast as a class difference. This is why Deepika and Kareena are in A list films while the actor Emraan Hashmi and various interchangeable women inhabit the B-world of Vishesh films. [16] It is in this B-world that Sunny Leone rules.

Can she break through that barrier? In response, we need only turn to Ms. Leone's own wisdom and insight. As she said in an interview before the release of her film *Jism 2* (transl. Body, 2012):

"There's nothing too crazy in the film. You aren't going to see anything



Sunny Leone and fellow rising megastar Randeep Hooda in *Jism* 2 (Body, 2015). A "blandly numerical" stardom built on the newly relaxed censorship regulations that allow even topless massage sequences.

here that you haven't seen before. In India, you know, you can push the envelope, you can't crack it open." [17]

If she cracks it open, then forever and ever "*chitthi ayi hai*" (transl. you've got a letter) shall be a song dedicated to Sunny Leone.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. Acknowledgment: This article, slightly copyedited for international readers, is reprinted with permission by the publisher and by Paromita Vohra, "The baffling success of Sunny Leone." *Man's World Magazine*, June 2015. https://www.mansworldindia.com/culture/features/the-baffling-success-of-sunny-leone/ Vohra is no relation to Karenjit Kaur Vohra, a.k.a. Sunny Leone.) [return to page 1]
- 1a. Chetan Bhagat is an Indian author and columnist. He was included in *Time magazine*'s list of World's 100 Most Influential People in 2010. Wikipedia contributors. "Chetan Bhagat." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Web. 9 Dec. 2021.
- 2. Born 1981 in Sarnia, Ontario, of Canadian Sikh heritage, Leone first made her mark in U.S. porn media, including *Penthouse*, before embarking on a Mumbai-based TV and film career in 2011.
- 3. Kai Friese, "The Porn Star Sunny Leone's Bollywood Makeover," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2015.
- 4. The Kama Sutra is an ancient Indian Sanskrit text on sexuality, eroticism and emotional fulfillment in life.
- 5. A reality TV show in which young men and women try to find the perfect partner for themselves while going through various rounds and performing challenging tasks in a villa isolated from the real world.
- 6. Anushree Majumdar, "Heat of the Moment: Sunny Leone says she is different from what people think of her." *Indian Express*, June 23, 2014.
- 7. Paromita Vohra, "The baffling success of Sunny Leone." *Man's World Magazine*, June 2015.
- 8. Poorva Rajaram, http://old.tehelka.com, vanity-fair-24 Dec 3, 2011.
- 9. The initial conversation was Priya Gupta, "Sunny Leone is a sweet girl in a sex starved nation: Ekta Kapoor." *The Times of India ETimes* (Mumbai) Mar 19, 2014. *Men'sXP* followed with Ankush Bahuguna, "10 Reasons Why Sunny Leone Deserves As Much Respect As Any Other Famous Celebrity." May 19, 2015.
- 10. Transcribed by the author. Source unknown.
- 11. By 2019, India had dropped down to 15th on the list of countries, due reportedly to state inference with access. Phone and tablet use had risen to 90%, second-highest in the world, after the Philippines. https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review
- 12. Transcribed by the author. Source unknown.

- 13. Leslee Udwin is a Jewish British filmmaker, actress, director, producer and human rights activist.
- 14. Transcribed by the author. Source unknown.
- 15. A *tawaif* is/was a highly successful female entertainer who catered to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the Mughal era. The tawaifs excelled in and contributed to music, dance, theatre, and the Urdu literary tradition, and were considered an authority on etiquette.
- 16. Vishesh Films is an Indian film producing company owned by Mukesh Bhatt. Vishesh Films is one of the most successful Indian film production houses.
- 17. Transcribed by the author. Source unknown.

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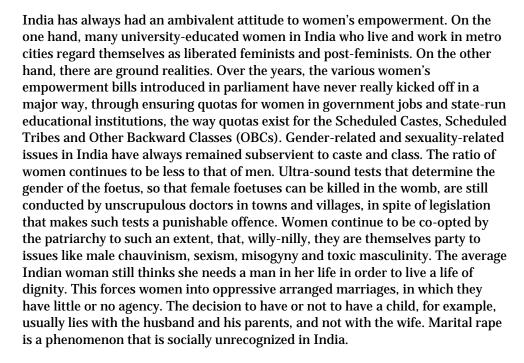


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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Umbartha and Fire: when women turn to each other to satisfy their needs

by R. Raj Rao

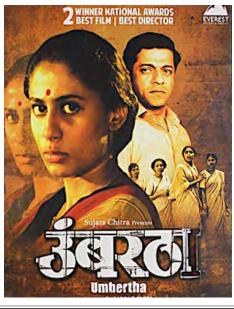


It is in this context that I should like to examine the practice of lesbianism in two late twentieth century films, the Marathi film *Umbartha* (also commonly transcribed as *Umbertha*, 1982; Hindi version: *Subah*) and the Hindi/English film *Fire* (1998).



Billboard advocating against female foeticide, New Delhi.





The Threshold/Umbartha, published screenplay. Calcutta, Seagull Books, 1985. Cover depicts award-winning Bollywood and art film star Smita Patil (1955-1986), whose untimely death the following year led to many tributes and retrospectives around the world.

Umbartha, DVD cover (original Marathi version of film). Protagonist played by Smita Patil.

Umbartha

Umbartha, which would translate into English as "Threshold," is based on a Marathi novel, *Beghar*, by woman writer Shanta Nisal. The screenplay for the film was by the noted playwright Vijay Tendulkar together with Vasant Dev, while the film was directed by the noted director Jabbar Patel.

The central character in the film is Sulabha Mahajan, played by the art cinema star Smita Patil (1955-1986). Sulabha, in order to make use of her MSW degree, decides to leave her home in the city against the wishes of her husband Subhash (Girish Karnad), and mother-in-law (Kusum Kulkarni), to take up the job of Superintendent of a Women's Reformatory Home in Sangamwadi, a remote town in Maharashtra.

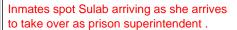


Production stills from *Umbartha*: Sulab (Patil) calms inmates as they watch a fellow inmate threatening suicide on the prison roof.



Inmates receive their weekly rations.







Police return two inmates who have tried to escape.

Sulabha faces many challenges in her job. The women inmates in the home are undisciplined. The management of the home, headed by a matriarchal woman director (Ashalata Wabgaonkar), is so corrupt and self-seeking that it allows a local MLA to have illicit sexual relations with the destitute women of the home to satisfy his lust. When two inmates run away and are forcibly caught and brought back to the home, they decide to commit suicide by setting themselves on fire. The newspapers expose the incident, and the managing committee conducts an enquiry against Sulabha for her alleged mismanagement of the home. She is forced to resign and return to her husband, who, she discovers, has taken a mistress in her absence. Sulabha, like Sita in the Valmiki's Hindu epic *The Ramayana*, crossed the threshold, the Laksman Rekha protective circle as it were, by leaving her husband's home, and she must pay the price for it.



Sulab receives a late-night phone call from a lecherous politician who demands access to the inmates.



Goddess Sita pining away in exile, separated from her husband Lord Ram, by South Indian Painter Ravi Raja Varma (1901).

In the midst of all the mayhem portrayed in the Women's Reformatory Home in Sangamwadi, the director Jabbar Patel decides to insert a lesbian scene in the film. I call the scene an extrapolation because it probably does not exist in the novel *Beghar* on which the film is based. Screenplay writer Vijay Tendulkar has himself written a homophobic lesbian play, *Mitrachi Goshta*, translated into



Spying upon two inmates making love on the prison roof at night (DVD frame grab).



Closer view of apprehended lesbian lovers (DVD frame grab).



Apprehended lovers are shamed by their fellow inmates, one spitting at them (DVD frame grab).

English as *Friends' Story*, in which the female protagonist who is sexually attracted to members of her own sex, is reclaimed at the end of the play and made to give her consent to an arranged heterosexual marriage.

Two patriarchal heterosexual men, Jabbar Patel and Vijay Tendulkar, took it upon themselves to deal with the theme of lesbianism. That too occurred in 1982, when India's first gay support group, Ashok Row Kavi's Humsafar Trust, was still eight years away, and the Naz Foundation had not yet dreamed of filing its petition in the Delhi High Court to abolish Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized what it called "unnatural" sex. Such timing guaranteed that the scene gives a field day to all homophobes and voyeurs, both within the film, as well as in the audience.

But what is the scene? Two women inmates of the home, one stereotypically shown by the camera to be butch and the other femme, are on the roof in the middle of the night hugging and caressing each other. It is an expression of love rather than lust, of belonging rather than longing. Yet, when the male night watchman who is on his rounds discovers them as he flashes his torch on the roof, his reaction is a mixture of shock, disgust and horror. He wakes up all the other inmates of the home and alerts them to the nefarious activities of the two lesbians. The inmates respond to the watchman's call, rise from their sleep, and gather on tiptoe in the courtyard of the home, even though it is the dead of night, to see what is going on on the roof. The inmates then gang up against the two unfortunate women and publicly shame them with much verbal abuse. They are as shocked, disgusted and horrified by what they have witnessed as the male watchman. Not one of them has the wherewithal to come to the defence of the two victims, in whose place, theoretically speaking, any of them could have been.

As to the two women themselves, they are instantly made a party to their own alleged crime, immorality and guilt. They simply do not have the framework and the vocabulary with which to defend their act. They are doubly marginalized—first as women, and then as women who love each other. If class and caste are added to the politics of identity, the women become trebly marginalized as poor, abandoned, battered women.

That none of the women, including the victims themselves, have the vocabulary and framework to describe what happened on the roof during the night, is evident when the inmates storm into Sulabha's office the next morning to complain about the incident, and demand the instant removal of the two offending women from the home. The inmates say to Sulabha,

"Madam, the two shameless women were doing what a man and woman are supposed to do."

Sulabha is flabbergasted by the women's insinuations. At an intellectual level, her education instinctively makes her see the two lesbian women as subalterns, no different from the other subalterns in the home. Yet, her confused demeanour makes it evident to the audience that she has never personally witnessed lesbian love at first hand. How could she? While male homosexuality in India has always been practiced in public arenas like parks and washrooms, and even on the street, female homosexuality has preferred to secretly express itself within the four walls of an apartment or a dorm room, which serve as an alibi. As Ashwini Sukthankar says in her Introduction to *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*



Closer view of shamed lesbians (DVD frame grab).



The more "mannish" of the pair is deliberately scalded by a fellow inmate distributing hot dal (Youtube frame grab).

(Penguin, 1999),

"Our status as myth means that many people truly believe we don't exist, and it means inhabiting the domain of their ignorance, which is neither acceptance nor condemnation. It means being able to live together and spend time with each other, as long as the sexual root of the relationship is never discussed with anyone."

Not content with assaulting the victims with foul language and demanding that they be thrown out of the home, the inmates then resort to violence. As their evening meal is being served to them in the community dining hall the next day, two inmates conspire to fling a bowl of boiling hot dal on one of the victims to scald her. The woman is in agony as a result of the vicious act. But no one comes to her aid. Her partner is pained by the attack, but there is precious little she can do. All the inmates seem to be of the opinion that the perverse woman deserves the punishment meted out to her.

Significantly, it is the masculine-looking woman on whom the boiling hot dal is thrown, while her feminine-looking partner is spared. This implies that to the inmates of the home, it is the masculine-looking woman who is the unrecognizable other. It is she who is seen as the initiator of the immoral liaison, and as the seducer of her petite feminine partner, who in appearance resembles all the other inmates.

The violent scene in *Umbartha* is one of the earliest and most graphic scenes of homophobia ever shown in Indian films. Later films that have had homophobic gay-bashing scenes include Ketan Mehta's *Holi* (1985), Riyad Wadia's *BomGay* (1996, based on my poems); Onir's *I Am* (2010); and Karan Johar's short *Bombay Talkies* anthology film, titled *Ajeeb Dastaan Yeh Hai* (2013). Of these, *Umbartha* is the only film to portray a lesbian gay-bashing scene.







BomGay (dramatic short by Riyad Wadia, based on poems by R. Raj Rao, 1996): VHS transfer frame grabs from scene showing gay bashing in public toilet (original celluloid version is lost).

What interpretation may one offer of *Umbartha's* homophobia? To my way of thinking, the female inmates of the Sangamwadi home are co-opted by the patriarchy to such an extent, that they cease to be women and assume a figurative maleness that is revealed here in their point of view. Their point of view is no different from that of the film's male director, Jabbar Patel, and its male screenplay writers, Vijay Tendulkar and Vasant Dev. The homophobia of the latter is grafted on to the former. I am unwilling to give the three men named above the benefit of doubt, as some viewers of the film, opposed to essentialism, may be inclined to do, arguing that in their depiction of the spiteful actions of the female inmates, the men are really cashing in on irony. This is because, to the best of my knowledge, all the three men identify as heterosexual, and are married men with children. It would have been different if a gay-identified man or woman was associated with the film.

What to me is ironic, however, is that the female inmates who assume a figurative maleness, as I put it, should perpetrate a violent act on the very woman with a masculine demeanour, where I would expect them to at least subconsciously identify with her.

The other aspect of the female inmates' homophobia that I wish to comment on is their total inability to see the liberating possibilities of lesbianism, which, like feminism, is after all an 'ism'. In other words, lesbian love is not merely about the gratification of sexual desire, but is also about female political bonding. This is what leads to the notion of political lesbianism, about which the female inmates of the home, the Superintendent Sulabha, as well as the home's matriarchal director, also named Mahajan, are blissfully unaware.

If anything, it is the inmates of the home, rather than happily married mainstream middle class Indian women, who should be able to view lesbianism as emancipation. It would do well for the inmates to ask themselves why they were in the home in the first place. They were obviously there because they were uneducated, had no husbands, and thus no means of economic support, or if they were married, had husbands who had abandoned them, or may be had other women in their lives, as Sulabha's own husband Subhash does. Destitution thus unites the women, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Actually, contrary to what I said above, Sulabha isn't totally unaware of the feminist dimension of lesbianism. Perhaps in her MSW course, there was a Gender and Sexuality component. But she is up against an establishment that is highly hostile and unsympathetic. Thus, when Sulabha feebly attempts to take up the cudgels for the two unfortunate lesbian victims of the home, she is instantly snubbed by her director, who menacingly asks her,

"What are you trying to defend, Mrs. Mahajan."

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Fire

Sixteen years after the release of *Umbartha*, another lesbian-themed film made its controversial appearance in India. The film was *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta, who, like the expatriate filmmaker Mira Nair, is a director of Indian origin who lives in Toronto, Canada.





Director Deepa Mehta (right) on the set of *Fire* with star Shabana Azmi.

Poster for Mehta's final film in her "elements" trilogy *Water* (2005), banned from its planned shoot in the holy city of Varanasi by rightwing Hindu protesters and filmed in Sri Lanka.



Fire: Sita (Nandita Das) and Radha (Shabana Azmi), new sisters-in-laws bonding in the kitchen of their Delhi family takeout (DVD frame grab).

Fire was the second film in Deepa Mehta's trilogy concerning the elements. The first film in the trilogy was Earth (1998), based on Bapsy Sidhwa's novel Ice Candy Man that dealt with the Partition. The third film in the trilogy was Water (2005), which showed how young widows, abandoned by their families in Varanasi's infamous Vrudhashrams, are lured into prostitution by unscrupulous politicians. Incidentally, the Hindu right was so offended by Water's theme, that it forbade Mehta from shooting the film in Varanasi; the film was eventually shot in Buddhist Sri Lanka.

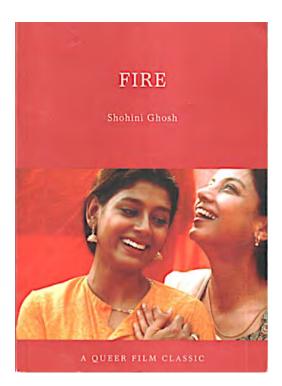
Fire, loosely based on Ismat Chughtai's 1942 Urdu short story Lihaaf (English Translation *The Quilt* Penguin India, 1994), revolves around two sisters-in-law, Radha and Sita, in a middle-class Delhi household, whose husbands run a takeaway in which they help. While Radha is married to the elder brother, Ashok, Sita is married to the younger brother, Jatin. Both Radha and Sita have unsatisfactory sexual relations with their husbands for different reasons. In Radha's case, it is Ashok's vow of celibacy that fails to consummate her marriage. The man responsible for Ashok's vow is Swamiji, Ashok's fraudulent guru, who preaches abstinence. In Sita's case, conversely, it is Jatin's affair with his Chinese girlfriend Julie that accounts for his lack of erotic interest in his wife.

Ostensibly, it is their husbands' neglect that draws the two sisters-in-law to each other romantically, endorsing the heterosexist view that men and women turn to people of their own gender to satisfy their sexual needs only when they are denied the possibility of copulation with the opposite sex, as, for example, in single-sex dorms and prisons, or in institutions such as the Sangamwadi home in *Umbartha*. This is what has led to many women activists, lesbians, and director Deepa Mehta herself to claim that *Fire* isn't a lesbian film per se. Instead, they see *Fire* as a film



Sita in bed with her new "arranged" husband

Jatin (Javed Jaffrey), wondering why he has no erotic interest in her (DVD frame grab).



"Queer Film Classic" monograph on *Fire* by Shohini Ghosh (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010).

about women's empowerment and freedom of choice, and argue that the lesbianism portrayed in the film is at best situational or circumstantial lesbianism. Thus, as Ashwini Sukthankar points out in her Editor's Note to *Facing the Mirror*.

"We were accused...of having 'hijacked' the protests [against the banning of the film by the rightwing political party the Shiv Sena] by the mere act of being visible ...by being present. And a simple placard that declared its bearer to be 'Indian and Lesbian' earned an entire community much censure for alleged militancy and cultural anarchy." (For a complimentary lesbian take on this film, see Shohini Ghosh's *Fire: A Queer Film Classic* [Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010].)

To me, the term "situational" homosexuality or lesbianism is a myth. This is because, in a culture where virtually no enlightened sex education in schools and colleges exists, and where sex, by and large, remains a taboo subject, it is often situations in which people find themselves that serve as the catalyst that helps them realize their true sexual orientation. Several gay men have stated in various testimonies, as for example in my own book *Whistling in the Dark: Twenty One Queer Interviews* co-edited with Dibyajyoti Sarma (Sage, 2009), how the need to share a bed with other men in homes crowded with guests during events such as family weddings, have helped them discover their homosexuality, even when, erroneously, some of them have been previously married to women.

As far as *Fire* is concerned, however, it seems to me that it isn't even as if Sita discovers her lesbianism as a result of the circumstances in which she finds herself. Instead, I am inclined to believe from her tomboyish ways, reflected in her dress and mannerisms, that she is lesbian from the start. Jatin's lack of interest in her thus suits her and comes as a relief. It saves her from having to sleep with her husband for whom she feels little or no desire. It is a godsend that, again as testimonies and case histories show, few lesbians are fortunate enough to find coming their way. It is Sita who then initiates the sex with Radha, which is pleasurable to both of them.



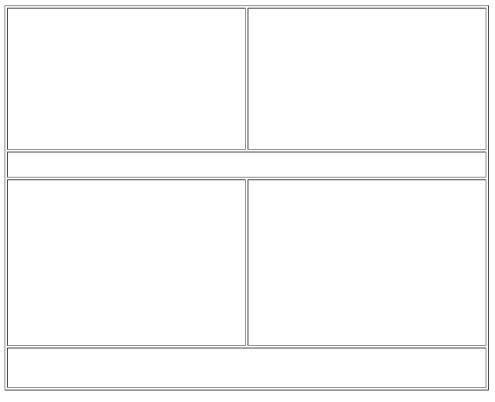


In "tomboyish" drag, Sita dances with her sister-in-law Radha (DVD frame grabs).





Sita "grooms" Radha with a sensuous leg rub during a family picnic...and then initiates her in her bed, romantically framed by mosquito netting. (DVD frame grabs)



Fire cashes in on the cliché that to heterosexual men, it is lesbian sex, rather than sex between a man and a woman, that is the primary source of titillation. This is proved by the voyeurism of the family servant Mundu, who is the first to detect the illicit liaison between the two daughters-in-law of the house. Mundu first masturbates in the presence of the women's old hapless mother-in-law Biji, as he watches porn videos filched from the store run by Ashok and Jatin. Later, however, he fantasises about Radha and Sita and even blackmails them, threatening to reveal all to their respective husbands. Biji is also made a witness to the "perverse" act of the two ladies, but being decrepit and bed-ridden, she cannot express her anguish.



Servant Mundu masturbates to porn borrowed from his bosses' video shop while the traumatized, incapacited matriarch Biji watches helplessly (DVD frame grab).



Mundu fantasizes himself as a mythological king romancing his boss Radha (DVD frame grab).

Eventually, Mundu lives up to his threat and spills the beans to Ashok. His voyeurism is then transmitted to Ashok, whose so-called celibacy goes for a toss as he is overcome by desire, trying to imagine, in all probability, what two women



Radha's sari catches fire in their kitchen while her husband, visible behind her, does nothing to rescue her. The scene references both the goddess Sita's mythological trial by fire to prove her purity and the widespread practice in contemporary India whereby dowry or marital disputes are "solved" by husbands and in-laws through staging fatal kitchen fires (DVD frame grab).



Happy ending: Radha escapes and reunites with Sita by night, seen in extreme long shot under portico of a deserted nearby shrine (DVD frame grab).



Bombay burning in anti-Muslim pogroms instigated by Hindu far right factions. *Open Magazine*.

can possibly do in bed.

The last scene in *Fire*, which gives the film its title, has been compared by critics to the original Sita's "agni pariksha," her ordeal or trial by fire in *The Ramayana*. It so happens that in the argument that ensues between Radha and Ashok upon his getting to know of her transgressions, Radha's sari catches fire. However, she survives her ordeal and is saved. It is then that, following Sita's example, Radha acquires the courage to walk out on her husband and join Sita, who has already left the house. Unlike *Umbartha*, *Fire* has a fairy-tale ending in which Radha and Sita decide to live together, happily ever after.

The Shiv Sena under Bal Thackeray's leadership was a rabble-rousing political party that upheld violence as a means to achieving their goals. They first came into prominence in the late 1960s, when they began a campaign against Bombay's Udipi restaurant owners and other South Indians to hound them out of the city, which they argued, belonged to the Marathi people, Bombay's cosmopolitanism notwithstanding. Many years later, the Shiv Sena began targeting poor people from other Indian states as well, such as hawkers and street food vendors from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, whom they wanted out of the city because they allegedly did work that rightfully belonged to the Marathi manoos (people). They also directed their ire against illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. As far as Indian nationals were concerned, the Shiv Sena's xenophobia was clearly unconstitutional, for the Constitution of India gave all citizens the fundamental right to live, work and settle down in any part of the country that they chose to. But the Shiv Sena thought they were above the law and could do as they pleased. Since most policemen in the lower echelons of the Bombay Police were Maharashtrian men with loyalties to the Shiv Sena, the latter's vandalism went unchecked. No Shiv Sena men were ever arrested, and even if they were, they were released on bail within a short time. Even the courts seemed to be afraid of them

As the Justice Sri Krishna Commission Report shows, the Shiv Sena had a major hand in the bloody riots that took place in Bombay in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6th December 1992. Their boys especially went after Muslims from Dharavi and other slum colonies of the metropolis, as well as from predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods like South Bombay's Bhendi Bazaar and Mohammad Ali Road, killing many of them. Some people belonging to faiths other than Islam, such as Zoroastrianism, were also killed, for the illiterate rank-and-file in the Sena were unable to distinguish between one minority non-Hindu community and another.

Fire was released over five years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and the riots and March 1993 bomb blasts that ensued. The film ran into problems from the word go. I went to a late night screening of the film at a cinema in downtown Pune with a male friend and a female student. There were lewd catcalls from the men in the audience the moment the lesbian scenes, performed by progressive Muslim art cinema star Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das who played Radha and Sita respectively, came on.



Regal Cinema in central New Delhi vandalized by far right rioters, during 1998 first run of *Fire*. *The Hindu*.



Bombay Boys (Kaizad Gustad, 1998): Roshan Seth (*Gandhi*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*) as gay landlord.



Lovemaking episode in *Fire* led to "lewd catcalls" in Pune first run (DVD frame grab).



Lovemaking episode, shot with stand-in for Sita, *Fire* (DVD frame grab).

Most of them hailed from the same lower middle class background as boys of the Shiv Sena. As a result, it was impossible for us to hear the dialogues that accompanied the scenes. This happened at other cinemas in other Indian cities as well, leading to a request by women's groups to have special screenings of the film for an all-women audience made up entirely of women, except, perhaps, for the ushers of the cinema hall.

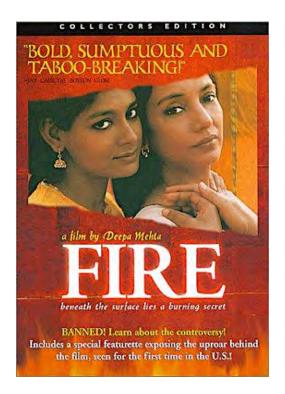
The Shiv Sena's next move was to vandalize cinema theatres where the film was screened. They ripped seats, and smashed lights and fans. They shattered glass. They then called for a total ban on the film, with Bal Thackeray even sarcastically saying that he would allow the film to be screened provided the mythical Hindu names of the two women (Radha and Sita) were replaced by Muslim names. One of the names he is said to have suggested is that of Shabana Azmi herself. Some even thought that this was a throwback to the belief that it was the Muslims who brought homosexuality to India during medieval times, with lyric forms like the Persian ghazal, and practices like *laundebaazi* (roughly, boys' sexual play)

Around the same time that *Fire* was released, a film called *Bombay Boys*, directed by Kaizad Gustad, also made its appearance in the theatres (1998). It had a male homosexual character, played by the actor Roshan Seth. But the Shiv Sena did not take exception to the film. Already, their double standards were becoming clear. What it implied was that in a patriarchal male-dominated set up, men, unlike women, could get away with anything, including homosexuality. The onus of guarding society's morals was on women, not on men, who were its repositories. As such, there was a great degree of homosociality among lower middle class Indian men, and often this served as an alibi for homosexual activity by men who did not identify as gay, but were simply referred to as MSM (men who had sex with men). In the light of the AIDS pandemic, this community of MSMs, in fact, grew, with men finding it safer to make out with other men, rather than to visit prostitutes in the city's red light areas.

Of course, it isn't as if the Shiv Sena did not resort to gay-bashing and the blackmailing of gay men in places like parks and public urinals. I myself have been a victim of this on more than one occasion. But this wasn't done for moral or ethical reasons. It was expressly done for the purpose of extortion.

In time, however, it is the Mahila Aghadi, the women's wing of the Shiv Sena, which took over from their male colleagues the business of objecting to the screening of *Fire*. The men, for all I know, were quite content to let the film run, for, as pointed out above, lesbian sex is a great source of amorous excitement to straight men. But the women were so outraged by the film that they issued a public statement that said,

"If women turn to each other to satisfy their needs, what happens to the institution of the family?"



Fire: US DVD cover.

The statement implied two things: (1) the Mahila Aghadi was aware that women could pleasure each other by, say, the rubbing of vulvas, and so on; (2) ironically, the Mahila Aghadi saw themselves as guardians of that most patriarchal institution, the family.

It is the second implication that here intrigues me. This is because in the value system upheld by members of the Shiv Sena, and indeed by all right wing political outfits, women are accorded a low status in the family. They have little or no agency, even over their own bodies. They are regularly subject to wife-beating, marital rape, and other forms of domestic violence. And yet, exactly like the destitute women inmates of the Sangamwadi home in *Umbartha*, the Shiv Sena women, who were anything but destitute, were nonetheless totally unable to see the liberating possibilities of lesbian love. Co-optation by the patriarchy had thoroughly blinded them. They were thus speaking out in defence of an institution that was responsible for their own enslavement.

It is this self-inflicted homophobia among women that serves as a common theme that binds two otherwise very different films, *Umbartha* and *Fire*. Ashwini Sukthankar points out how many Indian women reject the word "lesbian" for its white Western connotations. I would add that they even see it as a "bad word," like the words "slut" and "whore." Yet, as Sukthankar says,

"...when we name ourselves we can see ourselves for who we are: a group of women utterly diverse in terms of region, class, community, age, marital status, but with this one thing in common. Our love for women—that which marks us as different from the rest of the world, which brings us together, and which must be voiced if it is not to be lost."

And though Sukthankar uses the term "love" in the above quote in a specifically sexual sense, I am inclined to go beyond the mere sexual denotations of the word to see what it connotes—the militant bonding of women as a weapon of resistance.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Is It Too Much to Ask? (2016).



The playful Smiley directly acknowledges the camera and her tacit understanding with the filmmaker.



Glady reflexively taunting the crew.

The camera follows Simley and Glady everywhere:

Leena Manimekalai's Is It Too Much to Ask? — tenancy, transphobia, and Tamil society

by Swarnavel Eswaran

Leena Manimekalai's recent film *Is It Too Much to Ask?* (2016) has a complex use of performative, personal, and political humor. In addition, it is reflexive in the sense of drawing our attention as an audience to the very process of filmmaking and its staging of humorous dialogue as a political tool to interrogate heteronormative culture and its biases. The work is docudrama and comes from a director who primarily makes documentaries. Though the border between fiction and documentary is increasingly blurred in recent years, docudrama, a mode which often uses nonprofessional actors in actual locales, has become increasingly popular due to its ability to shed light on the realities beneath the drama of our everyday lives.

In *Is It Too Much to Ask?* the docudrama form enables staging reenactments and documenting the lives of transwomen Smiley (Living Smile Vidya) and Glady (Angel Glady) as they search for an apartment to rent in Chennai, South India. The real-life theatrical actresses have been asked to move out of their current apartment by the landlord, and the immediacy of and the anxiety surrounding finding a place to live sets up the drama, while, simultaneously, their actual search enables the possibility of following them in real-time and documenting their hopes and despair. Thus, their desperation to find a roof over their head, a profound issue in a city like Chennai, offers the possibility of a nuanced docudrama, where the divide between the staging of events and the spontaneous recording of actions as they unfold in front of the camera gets increasingly blurred.

Initially, we see Leena, who with her crew is visible in much of the film, establishing Glady and Smiley's apartment hunt through staged sequences as they browse through the classified columns in *The Hindu*, the iconic English newspaper in Tamilnadu. However, once they get the contact number and start talking to the advertiser, the conversation seems candid, so that the earlier provocation/staging leads to the documentation of (mis)communication as well as prejudice. In this case, the person at the other end struggles to address Smiley or hangs up on her abruptly once they grasp her lack of normative "family" status.

The film incorporates a *vérité* style documentary aesthetic which involves following the subjects—Smiley and Glady—with an unobtrusive camera as they meet one landlord/apartment owner after the other only to be rejected as deserving tenants mainly because of their sexual orientation, not conforming to the norm. Landlords with their upper Hindu caste requirements often want tenants to be vegetarians, to avoid "smelly" beef. As full-time theater professionals without a monthly payslip, these two are not as attractive as tenants like the



...to a house



...the school





...varous apartments



information technology professionals who earn relatively high, consistent incomes. Sometimes the filming has to stop was when Smiley and Glady start talking with the landlord(s), or the camera films only the protagonists so that the responses of the landlord(s) often just heard.

The landlords' responses themselves, often curt or averse, lead us through a chain of shifting signifiers. Through these comments we sense the fear and indifference at the heart of a highly conservative society. Visually, the two transwomen protagonists flag their non-normative sexual orientation through the way they dress and use make up. Just as the apartment owners are finding ways/excuses to quickly dismiss Smiley and Glady as possible tenants, even if the women fulfill all the requirements listed in the advertisements, Smiley and Glady are sharp-witted and swiftly expose the landlords for who they are. The performance of Smiley and Glady, therefore, leads us to the drama of the encounter. Their wit and humor, often tinged with a claim for equal treatment and civil rights in a democratic society, along with their subtle but seething anger and cynicism, uncover and deconstruct the conservatively obtuse and patriarchal Tamil bourgeoisie. Their performance recalls Gilles Deleuze's meditations on difference and repetition:

"The more our daily life appears standardised, stereotyped, and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition, and even in order to make the two extremes resonate—namely, the habitual series of consumption and the instinctual series of destruction and death" (Deleuze 1994, 293). [open works cited page in new window]

For this reason I am led to examine *Is It Too Much to Ask?* in detail to see "how art is injected" into these stereotypical situations through humor. The narrative strategy uses repetitive incidents—the landlords and their rental units—and denials, due to difference, and then a waning of hope and onset of despair. I am particularly interested in the way humor is deployed, particularly in the very beginnings of *Is It Too Much to Ask?* before the narrative is subsumed by the social realities in which it is embedded. Especially through the performance of the protagonists, the transwomen Smiley and Glady, this opening exposes and undermines the superficiality of the land/apartment owners in Chennai, whose fear, anxieties, and prejudice exemplify that of the vast majority of the educated middle class. By focusing on the supposedly well-informed, "liberal" segment of society and its hypocrisy, the film reflexively draws attention to the homeless, nomadic state of Smiley and Glady, who refuse to hide their trans identity or lie about it, thereby foregrounding the plight of those who are out of their closets in Tamilnadu/India—they are forced out of their homes as well.

Towards this end, I will use the famous essay by the philosopher Henri Bergson, "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" (1914) since the absurd search for a roof over one's head is a classical comedic plot structure, so the film thus echoes Bergson's engagement with the humor in Molière's plays. In his detailed analysis of Molière, Bergson focuses on the characters' rigidity. For instance, memorable Molière characters like Arnolphe, Alceste, and Harpagon seem to be oblivious to the consequences of their actions and this inflexibility and failure to adapt causes the humor (Mathewson 1920, 8). In the case of *Is It Too Much to Ask?* it is not the repetitiveness of the search but the rigid landlords and their



...on the street



...in a railway station



...inside a train



...in a bus



...and on a motorcycle.

mechanical, predictably negative responses which enable a space for humor. Bergson's meditations on humor dwell on the context of its mechanical rigidity, social significance, repetition and repression. Thus I find his ideas on humor/laughter also applicable to contemporary films that engage topical issues complexly with an aesthetic of subtlety and reflexivity, even where our awareness of that aesthetic dissolves before it could be labeled and categorized as irony or satire.

Furthermore, Is It Too Much to Ask? is modern and contemporary in its approach as it draws on humor to seek the attention/intervention of a larger audience on an unpopular topical issue. The non-inclusive treatment of transwomen in contemporary times is particularly noticeable in India, where their claims for equal rights and treatment are spearheaded by a few activists like Leena Manimekalai, whose bisexuality is well-known through her anthology of autobiographical poems. The problem, as Deleuze puts it, is that pleading the case of the particular still means that the particular stands out as a problem or an aberration: "[g]enerality as generality of the particular ... stands opposed to repetition as universality of the singular" (Deleuze 1994, 1). In this way, Is It Too Much to Ask? is, ultimately, about the singularity of Glady and Smiley as transwomen as exemplified by the equivocal climax of the film. Within the general situation of a landlord suddenly asking his tenants to vacate in Chennai, the film focuses on the uniqueness of its protagonists' predicament as transwomen who do not want to hide their identity. Thus, their search for an apartment and the responses are singular and do not offer to be collapsed under the notion of the discontents surrounding an apartment hunt in a big city. Repetition is "difference without a concept," according to Deleuze (1994, 13). Here I want to move from the idea of mechanical repetition's use in evoking humor to shed light on Glady and Smiley as transwomen, whose acts of repetition then are difference without any originary identity or concept to be compared with.

Repetition and Is It Too Much to Ask?

The act of Smiley and Glady's hunting for an apartment exposes the rigid parameters of gender ideology, setting norms for appropriate sexual conduct or the ideal heteronormative "family." According to Bergson, the comic has to be relatable to the human:

"The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it,—the human caprice whose mould it has assumed" (1914, 3).

The film has us travel with Smiley and Glady, experiencing apartment hunting through their needs and subjective point of view. We see a series of houses and apartments and occasionally the (relatively) luxurious space of the kitchen and the bedroom. Therefore, Bergson's claim regarding the human aspect of the comic resonates with this kind of apartment-hunting. Its resonance may have a greater social significance for Indian audiences since living as a tenant in Chennai has

Smiley and Glady encounter a sympathetic landlady and her curt husband.



Smiley and Glady enamored by the sunlit rooms.



Mother's wish and windows.



Revealing their status to the landlady, she responds with



.... a tacit understanding: "No one will know. We will mind our own business."



The intruding husband

become a nightmare for the millions who cannot afford to own their own home, It is one of the costliest metropolises in India. Nonetheless, the landscape of Chennai in the backdrop makes clear the explicit contradictions expressed by potential new landlords and their embarrassing hypocrisy. For instance, the first elderly landlady who objects gently to being filmed welcomes Smiley and Glady and is almost willing to let them in as tenants. Even after Smiley and Glady inform her of their transwomen status, which she does not immediately grasp, she is warm and asks them not to spill the beans and keep it a secret. However, her husband who barges in, a wireless phone on his hand explaining his delayed entry, is stern and curt. Not only does he object strongly to the director and her crew filming, but he also refuses to engage with these two potential clients and shows them out, along with the crew. We overhear as he admonishes his wife/and filmmaker: "Why do you bring such people here?" His harsh reaction is in stark contrast to that of his wife, who promised adequate metro water, the one supplied by the government, and groundwater if they were willing to pump manually for two hours every day, and went so far as to express her willingness to modify some amenities for the sake of her potential tenants.

We see a subjective shot of the apartment before Smiley and Glady meet the landlady discussed above. Smiley presses the calling-bell/buzzer outside the door, and the next cut is to their taking a look at the relatively spacious interior of the apartment, which has abundant sunlight due to the large windows in both of the rooms, the kitchen, and apparently the bedroom. Smiley gets nostalgic as she tells Glady how her mother's wishes of a sun-filled home with two large windows in each room seem to come true. As Bergson points out, here, the landscape evokes our interest as it is linked to the human, though it is not related to humor or laughter (Crocker 2010, 83). Nonetheless, it prefigures the warmth of the landlady who tells Smiley and Glady: "Keep it [their sexuality of being transwomen] a secret." Smiley and Glady tacitly agree, as exemplified by the big smile on Glady's face; she perhaps is surprised by this compassionate and immediate response from an older woman from an earlier generation.

The narrative moment implies that trans people did not usually encounter such realities at close quarters, since differently oriented people were usually almost erased or rendered invisible by the rigid and controlling hands of a patriarchal society. Traces of the latter reaction then become unmistakably visible when the husband makes his disapproval loud and clear as he slams the door without even engaging in a rudimentary conversation with his potential tenants who had, after all, responded to his advertisement in all earnestness and had fixed up an appointment before their arrival.

A subtle humor in the above sequence occurs because of the unexpected response of the landlady, which bridges the generation gap and undermines our stereotypes regarding older people, recalling Bergson's statement regarding the "anesthesia of the heart" as one of the primary conditions for laughter (1914: 5):

"The comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence" (Ibid, 8).

In this case, the difference of Smiley and Glady could be argued to silence the emotions of the seemingly traditional older woman and her intelligence-driven pragmatic response regarding secrecy is driven not by the emotion expected of a landowner in her locus. Bergson's reading against the grain is significant for us here since generally comic moments are perceived to be driven by the (excess) of emotion and not intelligence. For instance, Stephen Winer, in his essay for the Criterion Collection on Charlie Chaplin, has this to say:



...kicks out the potential tenants and film crew and admonishes his wife.

"Chaplin found that giving the audience a sustained emotional connection with his characters could bind his comedy into a coherent whole. Weaving pathos into the comedy helped to create an affecting series of peaks and valleys well suited to the longer form" (2013).

But in the case of the landlady her response could be argued to come from an "anesthesia" of her emotions and through her intelligence to safeguard the identity of her potential tenants with whom she empathizes.

On watching the film, there will be a smile on your face when the two like the apartment, and the apparently cautious landlady is willing to have them and responds positively to rent it. Smiley and Glady's names invoke the warmth of smile (Smiley calls herself "Living Smile" Vidya) and gladness, although happiness remains unlikely in the heartless structures of the highly conservative Tamil society whose urban headquarters/concrete jungle is Chennai. Nonetheless, a fleeting smile/warmth of the community is provided by the network of women.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Colorful artists.



Breaking free.



Smiley looking at Facebook, and disappearing "likes."

The very beginning of the film opens with the tacit understanding between the filmmaker and her protagonists Smiley and Glady, where they acknowledge the presence of but still perform for the camera: we see Manimekalai shooting a reluctant Smiley who is doing her makeup in front of the large mirror over the cupboard, and a shy Glady who is framed through the bars of her kitchen-window as she is about to soak the lentils (for the traditional South Indian dish of <code>sambhar/lentils</code> in gravy). Smiley and Glady's responses make it clear that this sequence was shot impromptu and not from a preplanned list of reenactments, and it then sets the stage for "real" events to unfold in front of the camera, as exemplified by the following scene that precedes the initial title sequence.

As we get a glimpse of selfies uploaded by Smiley through a close shot of her Facebook page, she informs us about a cell phone she had lost recently and her desire to "kill all her stalkers" by "unfriending" them on Facebook. She also reveals that on uploading her sensuous selfies/photographs, she gets a "thousand likes" from her Facebook contacts. However, the "likes" disappear the moment she posts something serious like her desperate search for an apartment. This sequence sets the tone for the two women's hankering for the warmth of shelter from a reasonably good apartment throughout the film. If the cozy atmosphere inside their apartment exemplifies their amiable domestic sphere, Smiley reveals through her activities on social media how connected the two are to the public sphere, primarily symbolized by contemporary social networking sites like Facebook. The film also calls attention to the fact that these modern Internet spaces are an extension of the globalized spaces of the cosmopolis of Chennai, where ideologically and personally the iron hand of orthodoxy and hate does not seem to loosen its grip when it comes to accepting alternative lifestyles and sexual orientations. Though the film's plot revolves around its protagonists' apartment hunting, Smiley's statement imagining killing her "stalkers" prefigures the series of unpleasant encounters the two women will have with strangers in the garb of landlords.

Immediately after the title sequence, we see Glady on her laptop filling in an online application form for an apartment. In a subjective close shot, we see the free classified ad submission page entitled, "OLX.IN: India's Largest Marketing Place." Glady fills in the details: "looking rented house for two working transwomen." She looks for a non-furnished, "400-500" square meter apartment, in the range of "6000 Rupees" per month. Glady's closeup (profile) as she contemplatively qualifies their status as working transwomen by retyping "transwomen" presages their struggle because of their identities, despite their ability to provide for themselves through income from their theater work. Glady's expectation regarding the apartment's size and rent also seems to be grounded in reality.

In filming all this, instead of weaving a tapestry of melancholia surrounding the failure to rent an apartment, the director and her protagonists decide to have a little fun along the way. That is, the actresses perform in staged sequences juxtaposed against the spontaneous/candid ones. In this way both the script and the main characters mock the isolating Tamil society that does not want to see or listen to people who do not conform to its idea of the normative. Such a homo/humo(r)sexual tone is set right at the beginning of the film. After submitting the above online form for an apartment, we see Smiley and Glady browsing through other classified advertisements in the newspapers. Smiley



Multifaceted professionals.



Glady doing online applications for apartments.





Smiley asserts her identity as a woman and the landlord abruptly hangs up.

circles advertisements that limit their applicants to "vegetarians" only. In India, targeting "vegetarians only" for tenancy indicates in a culturally specific way that the apartment is owned by a person belonging to a higher caste/Brahmin community. However, in contemporary times of Hindu fundamentalism, which forbids eating beef, the implications could be extended further. Such an advertiser might well be someone who supports/sympathizes with the aggressive Hindu right-wing ideology.

Responding to an ad, as Smiley calls a landlord, Mr. Jagadish, he repeatedly addresses her as "Sir," a vestige of the British colonial rule often used as a respectful way of addressing a man, and she keeps correcting him until he gets it right. Jagadish's mechanical action sets up repetition as one of the framing techniques of the film: it evokes laughter as it points to deeper problems of (mis)communication and disavowal/aversion on the part of the larger society that excludes Others who look or sound different. On Smiley's insistence that "She is not a Sir, but a Ma'm," Jagadish finally corrects himself, but by the time Smiley tries to express her interest in his apartment, we see that he has hung up on her. We hear the programed voice on the other end say: "The person you are trying to reach is speaking to someone else." In the above scene, when Jagadish fumbles in a case of mistaken identity by addressing Smiley as Sir, we see a "mischievous" smile during a quick exchange of looks between Smiley and Glady. In this way, we as the audience are invited to participate in the slapstick situation where an expectation is created regarding Jagadish's fumbling. Though the blossoming warm humor is abruptly cut off by Jagadish's hanging up, it sets up the narrative frame of the film. As Smiley and Glady hunt for a rented place to stay in Chennai, their performance-driven adventures will generate a framework of repetitions in connivance with the filmmaker's probing camera. Their successive encounters with varied landlords enable the possibility of cinematic humor intended to call forth and critique the indifference of an educated middle-class towards the imminent predicament of transpeople being thrown out on the street without a roof over their head.

Humor and repression

In his meditations on laughter, Bergson (1914, 73) points to the significance of repetition in the context of the repressed:

"Let us then state the law which, we think, defines the main comic varieties of word-repetition on the stage: In a comic repetition of words we generally find two terms: A repressed feeling which goes off like a spring, and an idea that delights in repressing the feeling anew." [open works cited page in new window]

Thus for Bergson, humor comes not from the mere repetition of words but from the context or the idea behind those words. The repetition of "Sir" by Jagadish in the earlier scene, despite Smiley's initial effort to correct him by telling him that "I am not a Sir, but a Ma'm," has its value mainly because of gender, because Smiley is a transwoman. On the one hand, her dialogue seems an expression of her (repressed) yearning to be acknowledged and addressed as a woman, the category to which she rightfully belongs, while on the other hand, the (matter of fact) repetition of "Ma'm" by Jagadish after Smiley corrects him a second time underscores his objective of (mechanically) rejecting (again) gender variance. Smiley's desire for acceptance is something the audience had seen momentarily go "off like a spring" from the coiled recesses of her heart. As he abruptly hangs up before talking about the rental, his rudeness signals society's narrow-mindedness in accepting phone calls according to its rigid demarcations of gender. This



Anxious interviewee



Endless search.



Mobile clouds but immobile hearts. The women are rejected as two professional women because they are "not a family...like a husband and wife."



Smiley and Glady take a moment to recover from the "family" onslaught.

shutting down of Smiley's voice prefigures a similar reaction when the two women visit an apartment in person. The elderly lady's husband not only makes a sudden entry and forbids the crew from filming his wife but also indicates that Smiley and Glady are uninvited, unwelcome visitors at his house: he instantaneously decides not to rent out the space he had advertised. These landlords have conveniently "forgotten" that the client at the other end has only been responding to their advertisements.

This discourteous, sudden cutting the call/slamming the door also troubles our understanding of humor or laughter in the conventional sense, as exemplified by Bergson's analysis of Molière's plays (Bergson 1980, 61-192). In the case of Smiley and Glady, the humor, at least in the film's early sequences, comes from the setup of the conversations. But then the abrupt end to their conversations with potential landlords also nips in the bud any possibility for the seeds of humor sown by the performances of Smiley and Glady to fructify into a burst of big laughter with possibilities of narrative transformation into irony or satire. The *coitus interruptus* in the initial stages of *Is It Too Much to Ask?* also points to a larger anxiety, particularly on the part of male agents in society, in accepting the blurring of the category of the female.

In addition, the director and actors undermine any such hope that we may have with women landlords. If during the conversation with Jagadish, the showcasing of the performative abilities of Smiley and Glady takes place in the setting of the balcony of their current apartment, the staging for the following scene of the telephonic conversation with a female landlord/apartment owner moves outdoors and takes place against the backdrop of the Bay of Bengal/Indian Ocean in Chennai where Smiley and Glady are sitting on a seawall/embankment by the sea.

This time around, the (female) voice at the other end probes the "family" status of the protagonists. In response to the initial self-introduction as "We are two girls ... we both are single and working professionals ... we are interested and would like to know more details (about the apartment)," the female landlord at the other end does not reveal any of the (extra) details regarding the apartment, but coldly asks "Are you, bachelors or family?" As the anxious Glady is keenly observing, Smiley says, "We are not married yet, but I may get married soon." It is through this statement by Smiley that we also come to know of their relationship as friends rather than lovers. When Smiley confesses that she is "looking for a boyfriend," the response is again cold, "How many members will stay?" Smiley repeats herself: "My roommate—another girl—and myself." The response now cools down further and indicates the disinterest of the landlord: "Where are you working?" Smiley sensing the indifference, hurriedly says, "I am working in a theater group called Panmai/Multiplicity. I am the founder of the group." Smiley also adds that she works with other theater groups and that she also conducts workshops for children. The denial/rejection becomes more explicit at this point: "Ok. We are looking for a family." A desperate Smiley responds, her voice becoming increasingly stern: "I have a family too. My parents ..." and the voice at the other end gets impatient and cuts in abruptly: "Ok, listen. A family will be better for us. So ... " After a pause, a visibly upset Smiley responds: "We also come from a family. We are not from Mars. My parents are working in my hometown, and I am working here." The voice at the other end goes, "No ...no. We are looking for a family. A family like a husband and a wife." This sums up the impossibility of Smiley and Glady's acceptance by the orthodox mainstream society in a nutshell: The family in their rigid view can only be heteronormative, and the endorsed relationship could only be the one between a man and a woman.

Smiley and Glady entertaining children with special needs through their theatrical performance as clowns and with soap bubbles.



In the school



Doing skits.



Blowing soap bubbles.



Humor and social significance

What is significant for us in the above sequence is that Smiley's (hurt) retort, "We are not from Mars," does not make us laugh. We are weighed down by the predicament and the almost impossible situation of our protagonists to find accommodation. The filmmaker straddles the aesthetics of drama and documentary in search of a form to frame both the performative energy of her theater-professional protagonists and the reality of their lives. The dialogue in the incident I just describds sheds light on the protagonists' interiority. The hopelessness of their lived reality subsumes their customary rhetorical flourishes, as exemplified by the witty and incisive retort of the creative (but bitter and angrier) Smiley, who is disappointed at a potential landlord's unwillingness to be open and their indifference. What keeps Smiley's statement short of cynicism is her desperation: she still wants to convince the advertiser that she has a family with Glady and that they are living a decent and legitimate life.

If laughter has a social function, then *Is It Too Much To Ask?* wears it on its sleeves in order to seek the attention of and engage with its audience, including members of the society for whom exclusion seems to be the norm. For Bergson,

"To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a Social signification" (1914, 7-8).

The resonance of laughter has to do with its social signification and utility. For instance, Smiley and Glady's plight attains its gravity and enables Leena Manimekalai to delineate the specificity of their struggles as transwomen because she, as the director, posits the scarcity of rental space within an urban city like Chennai as the backdrop. If she were to frame the plot in a village, the characters' struggle to find rented accommodation would not make much sense. The plot gains its urgency and relevance in terms of scrambling for space in a megalopolis like Chennai, and simultaneously, in a society that is not generally inclusive when it comes to people who look and work in areas that are different or nonnormative. More importantly, Smiley's flare-up signifies her outburst as a social being who yearns for acceptance as she also comes from a normal family and aspires to have one of her own as she is confident she can fend for herself with her work in theater. Here, Smiley's response is a consequence of the unjust rejections of the landlords/apartment owners and, therefore, is far removed from the "anesthesia of the heart' as well as humor. This sequence presages the emotional trauma of Smiley and Glady as their search for space is both outside and inside of the hearts of the people, they live around in Chennai. While in the earlier sequences with the older female landlord and Mr. Jagadish, the social signification and the utility aspect of laughter are easily discernable through the swift transition from ignorance about identity to a secret pact and the insular miscommunication, devoid of emotions, in the telephone sequence above with an apparently younger female landlord, emotion is not silenced.

We are able to empathize with the protagonists since we have seen them live in their current apartment as any other family would, with the regular routines of dressing, cooking, sharing a joke, going out to work, planning the future, etc. The sharp and intelligent response of Smiley of arguing for her normality (through her heteronormative parents) and against any abnormality (not an alien who has descended from planet Mars) does not have the wit that could invoke a smile but seems more of a (tired) voice with its (repeated) plea for legitimating one's identity and accepting their being as they are.

Children catching bubbles.



Playful goodbye.



Cheerful response.

In the next scene, we see Smiley (as Lillie) and Glady (as Julie) performing as clowns and entertaining special-needs students in an elementary school. We see the young children laughing out loud as they see Lillie and Julie they make soap bubbles with a wand and try to catch the flying bubbles along with some of the children in front. They also (inadvertently) slap each other as they clap alternate hands to a rhyme. Finally, as Lillie tries to pick her hat up from the floor, she repeatedly plays with the trick of kicking it with her toes a few feet away. She wins her big applause before she leaves with Julie. This scene is like a *mise-en-abyme* for the entire film: Smiley and Glady repeatedly perform their act of the search for an apartment while making a film. They do so in a way to entertain us while simultaneously drawing attention to the hypocrisy around and inside us. However, the filmmaking process might impede the rental process. As Smiley reveals to Leena in one of the scenes, where the filmmaker as a woman/activist is conversing with the actresses, the presence of a filmmaking crew might be working as a catalyst to encourage landlords to reject Smiley and Glady's application for a rented place. The masochism inherent in Smiley's kicking of the hat has its parallels in Smiley and Glady's efforts at performing for the camera and entertaining and informing us about their plight, though at the cost of their own suffering. The soap bubbles, which they create and attempt to catch with the students, recall in the bubbles' vanishing the many rented homes/apartments we see slip through the women's fingers throughout the film. Nevertheless, their untiring and spring-like bouncing back and the mechanical repetition of this same action recalls Bergson's thoughts on the breakdown of the human and the takeover of the mechanical during the repetition that's responsible for the comic. Importantly, this recursive feature also proves Smiley and Glady's untiring efforts and indomitable spirit in claiming a rightful space to live with dignity.

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Vegetarian as the garb for a Brahmin rejection.



Journey without a destination.



(Be)longings and alienation.



Feeling low on highways.

Humor as specter

prelude, and the scene at the school, discussed above, and the one during the climax where Smiley and Glady perform on stage in front of an audience could be argued to bookend the drama of Is It Too Much to Ask? After the school scene, the film becomes increasingly serious and darker as we see Smiley and Glady repeatedly turned down by owners. They are drained financially and emotionally as we see them pay a lot for the cab or take a bus, and finally, even drive a scooter after they have run out of money. The landowners range from a Brahmin/higher caste landlord, who uses the pretext of being a vegetarian to reject them; a willing landlord whose rent, however, is too high for Smiley and Glady to afford; and a government employee who denies them on the pretext of his preference for information technology professionals, as those workers are believed to earn a disproportionately higher income in these times of globalization and outsourcing. The long, disappointing journey of Smiley and Glady in their search for a compassionate landowner/reasonable apartment takes a toll on them as well. Towards the film's end, when they are packing their belongings to move, Glady, the younger of the two, breaks down and tells Smiley that they have not tried enough. Smiley tries to explain the hopeful efforts that would have to go into the two hundred apartments they might have visited. Glady angrily responds by saying that Smiley "is full of negativity" and that she has had enough. Smiley, too, reciprocates her bitterness brought on by their tiring and exhausting search: "... happily go ... Bye, Goodbye." An emotionally overwhelmed Smiley, taking stock of the situation, tells the director Leena to stop filming them; an angry Glady asks, "Leena, do you have to film everything? Can't you guys leave us alone? We have had enough, ok! Just stop it." Finally, on seeing the camera still rolling, Smiley asks Dhanesh, the cameraman, to stop, and he switches off the camera.

The various scenes tinged with humor, in the beginning, could be labeled as the

In the next scene, we see Smiley and Glady traveling in a van along with their belongings. Then, after the climactic scene where we see Smiley and Glady's theatrical performance at a school, we see them continuing their travel in the same van, in a Chennai street at night, lit with its yellow fluorescent lights. The only difference this time is that we do not know their destination. As the van moves away into the city at night, their journey reflexively encourages us to move inside and search for our own part, as agents/onlookers, in their poignant predicament. As we saw, when forced to pack their belongings without knowing where to transport them, Smiley and Glady got emotionally overwhelmed and momentarily noticed the obtrusive camera (and the crew) impinging upon their privacy and then vented their anger against Leena and her crew for intruding too much. Unlike in earlier sequences, this emotionally-charged tiff between Smiley and Glady marks this scene as spontaneous and real, though it intrudes into the tacit contract between the filmmaker and her subjects. By directly looking at the camera and asking Leena and then Dhanesh to stop filming, Smiley and Glady disavow their blurring of the aesthetics of performance and the encountering of the "real" or the documentation of their lived reality. As a filmmaker, Leena is invested in bringing their performance to closure as far as the narrative is concerned. Therefore, their (aimless) travel on the van with their belongings is interrupted by Leena's intercutting it with their climactic theatrical (makeup and) performance. Nonetheless, the reality of their fraught and endless journey is



Big city blues of noninclusion.



Patriarchy and precarity.



Glowing lights and the dwindling spirit.



Glady's final performance tells about apartment hunting. Smiley plays the landlord.

different in tone from the warm reception they get from an empathetic audience inside a theater. Unlike in the earlier segments of the film, wherein performance (for the camera) and reality often blend and blur the borders between representation and reality, towards the end, these two aspects of the characters' lives diverge. Such a divergence emphasizes the isolation and abjection of people on the fringes like Smiley and Glady whom the mainstream society heartlessly and unethically excludes in the name of the normative.

Nonetheless, the humorous and vivacious personalities of Smiley and Glady that we saw in the early sequences of the film haunt us, as they make the film's later sobriety even more solemn when we watch their energy dissipate and effervescence and hope subside. The only exception, in the penultimate sequence, is the lightness they feel among children, despite their heavy hearts because of the impending homelessness. Smiley and Glady's performance to entertain children recalls Bergson's observations on "the laughable element" of "mechanical inelasticity" that is predicated on denying expectations regarding "the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being" (1914, 15). [open works cited page in new window | The lack of pliability and the rigidity of their movement in a theatrical setting emblematized the "mechanical encrusted upon the living" and so provoked laughter among children (39). Simultaneously, the inelasticity of the landlords and their mechanical and inhumane denial inform us of how they have been rendered as automatons by their prejudices in a closed and hypocritical society. While Bergson is focused on the movements and reflexes of the body, Leena Manimekalai's focus straddles the exterior and the interior of human life. The protagonists' obdurate interiority renders the landlords/apartment owners as stereotypical and predictable regarding their expectations and detestation of difference. From the Bergsonian idea of the centrality of mechanical repetition for the comic in the context of the human, as exemplified by Smiley and Glady's attempt to entertain the school children, the last scene of their van-journey marks a transition to the Deleuzian concept of repetition and difference.

Toward the end, during the semi-climactic sequence of the play, it recapitulates in a funny but pungent way the bitter and absurd experiences of exclusion endured by the two transgender protagonists. In response to the landlord (played by Smiley) and the agent's accusation of her being different and her transparent underwear being "pink," Glady directly looks at us (the audience) and says:

"I feel. I shit. I laugh. I cry. I eat. I fuck. I breathe ... Just like everyone else (here) ... And the most important thing is ... I can pay your fucking rent. Just like everyone else."

Glady is reminding us of her resemblance to us, but her repetition during the play in response to her irreplaceable situation foregrounds her "singular behavior." In other words, her vital singularity cannot be measured or labeled against "what already exists"—the heteronormative in this case. As Jonathan Sholl notes, in his discussion of uniqueness as theorized by Deleuze:

"True repetition', [according to Deleuze] in *The Logic of Sense*, 'appears as a singular behaviour that we display in relation to that which cannot be exchanged, replaced, or substituted' and as such 'addresses something singular, unchangeable, and different, without 'identity.' (Deleuze 1990: 328)

As this true repetition 'authenticates the different', Deleuze uniquely links difference to repetition:

'Difference gives things to be seen and multiplies bodies; but it is repetition which offers things to be spoken, authenticates the multiple,



She describes her situation as a trans woman. "I am human too!"



"This is not pink."

and makes of it a spiritual event' (329). That true repetition is never of the Same, but of the Different, means not that to repeat is to enter into a pure flux where thoughts or identities dissolve into a sea of change, but it is to conceptualise a difference that *insists* in its vital singularity or virtual intensity and thus cannot be given an identity in terms of what already exists" (Citation and italics as in the original text. (2012, 555).

After the warm and loud applause from the audience Glady, who was returning backstage, turns back and looks at the audience one last time and, gesturing towards her underwear, says, "And you know what? ... This is not pink." Glady's final words indicate that despite the claustrophobic and constraining Tamil milieu, she has decided to be out of the closet unconditionally: She wears her pink/difference on her sleeve; there is no need for her to hide her identity underneath. Her last words, thus, prefigure the hope and enthusiasm which is still not entirely lost at the end, when their journey is repeated but with difference in the Deleuzian sense. Again from Jonathan Sholl:

"Instead, to think difference is to think the conditions that allow a thing to determine its own identity via its repetition for itself. It is for this reason that every 'repetition is a transgression' (Deleuze 1994: 3) since to repeat is not to reproduce what already existed but to create the unforeseen. The individual effectively repeats by creating concepts according to that which is moving him or her" (Citation as in the original text). (Ibid.)

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A photograph of the actual Gangubai, Source: Saroyan, "Who Was Real Gangubai Kathiawadi & All Characters Images/ Pictures Wiki Biography Full Story."



Sheela Maasi (left, played by Seema Bhargava), the madam of the brothel, overseeing Gangubai (right, played by Alia Bhatt).

Gangubai Kathiawadi — an unconventional Bombay biopic with a sex worker as hero

by Nilanjana Bhattacharjya and Monika Mehta

In an interview with film critic Anupama Chopra, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, director of the biopic *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), mentions that he advised the film's lead actress, Alia Bhatt, to prepare for her role by watching the courtesan classic *Pakeezah* (1972). Given that *Gangubai Kathiawadi* focuses on a sex worker in 1950s-60s Bombay, we would expect that Bhansali would recommend that Bhatt read the chapter on Gangubai Harjeevandas in *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*, which inspired the film or perhaps, watch documentaries on Bombay's red-light districts to get a better sense of this sex worker and her habitat. What does a courtesan classic set in Lucknow, steeped in filmic representations of Islamicate culture[1], [open endnotes in new window] and starring the tragedy queen Meena Kumari have to do with a Gujarati migrant sex worker? Bhansali's suggestion is farremoved from the demands of accuracy and authenticity that structure the generic expectations of a biopic.

We argue that in a deft, counter-intuitive move, with this film Bhansali changes the terms for how we approach both the courtesan genre and the biopic. Adding a further twist, he positions Alia Bhatt as a "traditional Bollywood hero" (Chopra). By mixing the sex worker, courtesan, and Amitabh Bachchan's famous angry young men roles, he shifts how we address the 'woman question' both on and off the screen. In a two-pronged move, Bhansali invites us to reimagine the history of India as nation and the history of Bombay cinema from the vantage point of bodies that are marginalized and cast as "illegitimate."

Inspired by the story of Gangubai Harjeevandas (1936-1977), Gangubai Kathiawadi ostensibly narrates the tale of a Savarna (upper-caste), upper-class young woman who is abducted and forced into sex work, and who later transforms into a political leader. Through a flashback, we get an account of Ganga's entry into the brothel and her transformation. Ganga is duped by her boyfriend, Ramnik Lal, who promises to bring her to Bombay and make her a film star. Instead, he absconds with her gold jewelry and sells her to a brothel for one thousand rupees. [2] Initially, Ganga refuses to sell sex, but eventually both physical violence and emotional coercion administered at the brothel defeat her will, and Ganga becomes Gangu, a sex worker. She quickly rises to become a much-desired sex worker, bringing in both clients and money. While Sheela Maasi, the brothel's madam, is delighted with the money that Gangu brings in, she fears Gangu's increasing power and popularity in the brothel. To cut Gangu down to size, Sheela Maasi deliberately sends her a brutal client, Shaukat Khan Pathan, who sadistically beats and rapes her. In order to obtain justice, Gangu turns to Shaukat's boss, the gangster, Rahim Lala, who proclaims himself as her brother and vows to protect her. Then, Gangu lays a trap for the rapist Shaukat,



Afshaan, the young Muslim tailor (played by Shantanu Maheshwari), who has a romantic relationship with Gangubai.



Gangubai with the Urdu journalist, Amin Faiz (played by Jim Sarbh), who publicizes Gangubai's work beyond the confines of Kamathipura.



Farhan Akhtar as champion sprinter Milkha Singh, "The Sikh Flyer," in the 2013 Bollywood biopic *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (Run Milkha Run)*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra. Singh, a Sikh, defines the new Indian nation in the 1950s and 1960s through his athletic masculinity in the Asia Games, Commonwealth Games and the Olympics. Source: Theatrical release poster, Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, ROMP Pictures.

who is mercilessly thrashed by Rahim Lala. Subsequently, Sheela Maasi, the brothel's madam, passes away, and the sex workers choose Gangu to be their leader, making her *Gangubai*. In order to expand the brothel's income, Gangubai, with Rahim Lala's support and collaboration, begins to sell alcohol. At this time, she also begins a love affair with Afsaan, a young Muslim tailor; later, Gangubai sacrifices this love for politics.

After establishing her economic might, Gangubai turns her attention to politics. She runs an astute and successful campaign against Razia, the incumbent Kamathipura president, drawing away potential voters by screening a film at the same time as Razia's speech. In order to ensure her win, she gets Afsaan married to a sex worker's (virgin) daughter. Once Gangubai becomes the area's president, she begins to advocate for sex workers' rights. She fights with politicians who wish to evict Kamathipura's poorer residents and sex workers and raze their homes to build luxury developments. She challenges the teachers and principal of a nearby convent school who discriminate against sex workers' children and denigrate them. With the help of a journalist for an Urdu newspaper, Amin Faizi, Gangubai attains public recognition and gives a crackling speech on sex workers and their rights at a political rally that is met with resounding applause. This speech is covered widely and secures Gangubai a meeting with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who does not accede to legalize prostitution, but promises both to set up a committee on sex workers' welfare and to block attempts to eradicate Kamathipura and displace its residents.

Re-imagining the biopic

Biopics have a long and enduring history in Bombay cinema (Dwyer). The past decade or so has witnessed an increase in production of biopics; life-stories of successful sports figures, anti-colonial revolutionaries, politicians, royal personages, geniuses, and brave citizens have enjoyed box-office success. The majority of these biopics focus on men and their impressive achievements; fewer biopics are on women. Thus, extending Tom Brown and Belén Vidal's assertion that the Hollywood biopic is a "biased fetishization of the great white man as the agent of history" (2016), we, along with Preeti Kumar, argue that the Bombay biopic positions great *brown* man as "the agent of history." Through her analysis of historical and revolutionary biopics, Kumar shows how this genre positions the nation as masculine. We can take these insights a step further and add that this genre both favors and reproduces the "good guys," i.e., resolutely moral and ethical, hard-working, self-sacrificial, aspirational, family-oriented figures, who are positioned as the legitimate heirs of the nation.

In biopics, immoral figures—gangsters, bandits, and wayward women—are generally punished so that we recognize "illegitimate" subjects of the nation—and we understand what happens if we choose to go astray. Diverging from the standard path of the biopic, Bhansali makes a film about a sex worker that positions her as an agent of history, 'mother' and legitimate heir of the nation. Although Gangubai's biological, 'real' family no longer recognizes her once she becomes a sex worker, at the brothel she forges new kinship relations. She becomes an 'older sister' for the sex workers, younger sister to a prominent gangster, aunt to the girl who she gets married, and mother to her friend's child.

The biopic is a hybrid genre often drawing upon elements of the sports film, war epic, historical, political drama and so on (Hollinger). However, it is often judged according to a realist yardstick. Thus, an actor's physical appearance, gestures and voice need to match closely those of the real person. The locations and sets



Seema Biswas as the notorious bandit Phoolan Devi, in Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994). At the conclusion of the film, Devi surrenders to the police as she kneels and lays down her weapons.

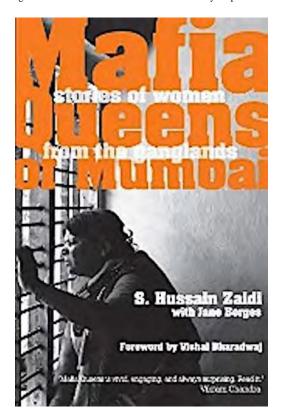


A memorial bust in the actual Kamathipura district depicting the actual Gangubai. This bust, like the first image on the previous page, bears no resemblance to Gangubai, as played by Alia Bhatt in the film. (Source: photograph by Chinki Sinha in Haima Deshpande, "Gangubai's Daughter On Alia Bhatt Film: 'My Mother Was A Respected Woman'" in Outlook India.)

similarly need to be authentic. Key elements of this genre—the flashback, and in media res story-telling— narrate difficult or ordinary pasts of these figures, which are subsequently overcome (Brown & Vidal, Cartmel, Haiduc). While a good dose of melodrama generally assists in amplifying the film's emotional charge, building narrative tension, creating 'larger-than-life' beings, and establishing connection with audiences, critical reception of the genre often laments any such moments and accuses directors' of simplifying the lives of these real personages (Haiduc). This realist style is visible in Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), a film that might appear to be a close companion to *Gangubai Kathiawadi* since its protagonist is a female "illegitimate figure."[3] However, Bhansali complicates the realist aesthetics that drive this genre. Moreover, unlike Kapur, Bhansali does not perform the "great rape trick," exploiting the protagonist's rape and calling it "realism." Additionally, at the end Bhansali's Gangubai is a triumphant figure who challenges the state, unlike Kapur's submissive figure, who kneels in surrender.

In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, Bhansali pairs realism with a melodramatic aesthetic . We encounter realism in full force during the opening and flashback where young girls who have been abducted are mentally and physically assaulted—broken, so that they submit to becoming sex workers. Melodrama, audible in the background score and plaintive sounds, intensifies our experience of these scenes. Alternately, in the qawwali song sequence, melodrama plays a particular role. (Qawwali is a musical form of South Asian Sufi devotional practice that frequently appears in Islamicate settings on film due to its fervor, visual spectacle, and the potential to exploit the tension between its lyrics' devotional vs. secular, romantic interpretations and contexts.) The mixing of realism and melodrama creates a contrast between the dreary, harsh world of sex workers and the visually sumptuous world of the courtesan genre. The melodramatic lighting, luminous for Gangubai, and dim, dull for the other workers, marks her as extraordinary—and them as ordinary.

If the force of the biopic is closely tied to the actor's 'authentic' performance, then Gangubai Kathiawadi's combining the real and the reel jostles our understanding of authenticity. Reviewers and we would certainly say that Alia Bhatt's performance in the film is "authentic," but not in a conventional sense. How do we make that assessment, and which criteria does it rely on? We know little about Gangubai. Unlike the typical protagonist of a biopic, before this film was released, she was not known globally, nationally or even locally. Her fame is limited to Kamathipura, Mumbai's red-light district, and its surrounding areas. In fact, there are barely 30 pages devoted to her life in the book Mafia Queens which inspires the film. According to Bhansali, he filled in the rest with his childhood memories of Kamathipura, the red-light district where Gangubai resides, and he integrated those memories with fictionalized yet recognizable representations from Bombay films (Chopra). The photos of the actual Gangubai available on the Internet show no discernable resemblance between her and Bhatt beyond the white sari and red bindi. [4] In fact, many netizens have commented that the real Gangubai was not as attractive as Alia Bhatt but still drew men. Thus, Bhansali isn't giving us a likeness of Gangubai. He is giving us representations that we recognize and therefore imagine being "authentic": the young Gujarati girl happily doing garba, the brothel madam, the courtesan, the sex worker, the politician, and the underdog hero effortlessly speaking Bambaiya Hindi. Bhatt conjures up and beautifully performs representations that we have imbibed and which structure our imagination.



S. Hussain Zaidi's book *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*(Tranquebar, 2014), on which *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is based. The book's foreword is written by Vishal Bharadwaj, an acclaimed Bollywood director himself whose 2004 film *Maqbool* resets Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within the Mumbai underworld. The English-language novelist Vikram Chandra, who blurbs the book, is known for his 2006 novel, *Sacred Games*, similarly set in the Mumbai underworld—and adapted into a Netflix series in 2018 and 2019. How one tells a story about the underworld is inextricable from its filmic portrayal.



Posters of Mughal-e-Azam (left) and Chaudhvin ka Chand (right). Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022).

Cinephilia, citations, and the crafting of alternate histories

Gangubai Kathiawadi is peppered with both aural and visual treats for a Hindi cinephile. They are curated, clearly much-loved moments of the past: e.g., a courtesan classic (*Pakeezah*), a historical tour-de-force (*Mughal-e-Azam*), a beloved social [5a] (*Pyaasa*), Bhansali's father's film (*Jahazi Lootera*), a Muslim social [5b] (*Chaudvin Ka Chand*). This cinephilia permeates the film. It can be found in the sets, lighting, framing of scenes, music and background score, the songs, the plot, the reference to the debonair male star, Dev Anand, the costumes and even, in our heroine's tresses. *Gangubai* doesn't just pay homage to films, but also to theaters, film posters, calendars, and star publicity photographs. This cinephilia encompasses sites of public exhibition, theatrical and outdoor screenings as well as the private adulation of a beloved star.

This film, however, is not simply a cinephile's delight. Through its dense and layered address, *Gangubai* directs us to alleyways of both filmic and political pasts, while pointing to the present and future. Cinephilia here plots alternate historiographies of cinema and the nation, forging a new figure of woman, who combines the roles of sex worker, daughter, sister, mother, lover, friend, businesswoman, and politician. This figure is not simply a series of identities worn and discarded, but an amalgamation of those identities that constitutes a movement, perhaps, a revolution, maybe even an institution. The film's final dialogue, "heroine banne aayi thi, kambakht poori, ki poori cinema ban gayi/she came to become a heroine, instead, became the entire film" aptly captures the larger-than-life size of this figure. Her longevity, the voiceover tells us, exceeds that of other films whose posters change every Friday. In stark contrast, posters of Gangubai have remained in Kamathipura for over 50 years.

Begum Akhtar's sonorous voice, singing Mirza Ghalib's well-known ghazal, "Yeh na thi hamari kismet/ This was not my fate," opens *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. This opening sets the tone for the film's dizzying references to both cinema and 'real' life. Akhtar was a daughter of a courtesan and barrister; her father abandoned her mother and his two daughters. Akhtar became 'Akhtar bai' a courtesan, and later, transformed into Begum Akhtar after she herself married a barrister. Akhtar's voice and life evoke the courtesan genre as well as parallels with Gangubai's biography. From its outset, the film thus takes a distinct position on a female biopic. This film is not simply about a biography of Gangubai. Rather, it is a history of both real and imagined female representations as indicated in



Sahibjaan/Meena Kumari in white anarkali in *Pakeezah* (1972). Source: Kamal Amrohi, *Pakeezah* (1972).



Nargis, "Lady in White."

Bhansali's advice that Bhatt watch *Pakeezah* to play Gangubai—as well in the narrative that Gangubai herself sometimes fashions. Citations and references are thus part and parcel of the film's narrative. The film, moreover, nudges its viewers towards a cinephilic sensibility, which uncovers varied layers of representation and connections with films as well as politics. This is visible both in reviews of the film and in our own viewing and conversations.

These are some of the associations the film had for us:

- Gangu's long black, curly tresses, reclining postures, head in lover's lap, the train sounds, the lover's marriage, and the frenzied dance recalled Sahibjaan/Meena Kumari in *Pakeezah*;
- Gangu's white saris reminded us of Sahibjaan's white anarkali and dupatta, and Anarkali/ Madhubala's white veil in *Mughal-e-azam* (1960);
- we remembered that the film director, producer and actor, Raj Kapoor had a penchant for dressing his leading ladies in white; the most well-known was Nargis, both Kapoor's heroine and lover, who was referred to as the "lady in white" [5];
- we noted that white was worn by both widows and India's politicians in India both on and off screen.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, President of Indian National Congress Sonia Gandhi, Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee, and Gangubai herself, have draped themselves in white saris of varied hues. [6] The white sari's associations with widowhood inherently suggest the celibacy and moral purity of the woman who wears it—to the extent that even a woman who never married, such as the late singer Lata Mangeshkar, consistently wore white saris to construct her moral authority—while performing in public. When Gangubai dons the white sari, we understand that she has taken charge of the brothel and will no longer be servicing clients; she no longer presents herself as sexually available.



Indira Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of India. Source: Marilyn Silverstone.



Sonia Gandhi, the President of the Congress Party of India, wearing a white

sari. [3a]

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Sheela Maasi (played by Seema Bhargava) in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022). Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).



Gangubai (played by Alia Bhatt) in Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022). Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022).



Khanum Jaan (played by Shaukat Kaifi) in *Umrao Jaan* (1981). Source: Muzaffar Ali, *Umrao Jaan* (2009).

Sheela Maasi/ Seema Bhargava and later, Gangubai's reclining postures as well as dark red lipstick steered us towards the brothel madam Khanum Jaan/ Shaukat Kaifi in *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and the painter Amrita-Sher-Gil. In choosing Seema Bhargava, the current favorite as on-screen mother, to play the brothel madam, Bhansali closes the gap between Bombay's iconic mother and courtesan/sex worker, who have otherwise occupied divergent moral and social orders in Bombay cinema. This casting choice nudges viewers to contemplate that a mother can be a sex worker and a sex worker can be a mother.

The reclining poses combined with unabashed stares underscore the power of the brothel madams. These women, as visible in the cases of Sheela Maasi and Khanum Jaan, were largely portrayed culturally as old, hardened, and sexually undesirable. In contrast, Gangubai's assertive stance is coupled with a luminous youth which is simultaneously sensual and beautiful; she knows how to do business and she chooses her lovers. A red *bindi* also distinguishes Gangubai from the two women, marking her explicitly as a (married) Hindu woman and once more, challenging the representational logic which has identified Muslim women as brothel madams.

The 'hero' shots of Gangubai with her legs on the car dashboard or rickety chairs with beedi held in mouth directed us towards the dockyard worker, Vijay/Amitabh Bachchan's pose in *Deewar* (1975). These shots, like the reclining poses, assist in developing Gangubai's identity as an authoritative figure and make visible a *gendered history* of screen representation. While Bachchan's iconic roles in the 1970s popularized and drew attention to the lives and experiences of young, working-class *men*, Bhatt's portrayal of Gangubai both identifies sex work as labor and highlights the concerns of working-class *women*.[7] [open endnotes and caption notes in new window]

In terms of plot and depiction, Gangubai is not like the heroines of the courtesan genre or tawaifs in other films. [8] She won't die, be saved or be left all alone: after all she's going to be taking care of 4000 sex workers. While her resilience and persistence might conjure up Nargis as Radha in *Mother India* (1957), she is not a moral pivot who binds and guarantees the Hindu community's legitimacy. In fact, as a Hindu sex worker, she interrogates the representational hierarchy of Bombay cinema, which so often designates on-screen mothers and respectable young women as Hindus and tawaifs as Muslims (Mufti).

Citations in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* take us down varied interpretative paths as they repeatedly refer to a history of cinematic representation. The poster of *Mughal-e-azam* signals the enduring love story of the courtesan, Anarkali, and the Mughal Prince Salim. Anarkali's bravery and defiance find an equal match in Gangubai. The poster for *Chaudhavin Ka Chand* reminds us of a poignant Muslim social set against the background of Lakhnavi Islamicate culture, featuring stock Muslim stereotypes, the wealthy Nawab and burkha-clad Muslim women. Later in this essay, we discuss how Bhansali restages Muslim figures. The poster for *Jahazi Lootera* (1957) gestures to a fantasy-action film made by Bhansali's father, the director-producer, Navin Bhansali. This loving tribute is flanked by posters of Gangubai, simultaneously referring to the 'real' brothel madam and Bhansali's film. This pairing draws our attention to how paternal genealogies and kinship relations have driven the Bombay film industry. Both Alia Bhatt, this film's leading lady, as the daughter of the director Mahesh Bhatt and actress Sonia





Alia Bhatt in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), andAmitabh Bachchan in *Deewar* (1972). Sources: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) and Yash Chopra, *Deewar* (1972).



A poster of Bhansali's father Navin Bhansali's film, *Jahazi Lootera* (1957), is flanked by posters of Gangubai, attesting to her stature. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).



Razdan, and Bhansali are the beneficiaries of such relations, but they also act to perpetuate and redefine those relations for their own ends.

In contrast, Gangubai charts a new set of relationships, not linked by paternity or blood. Finally, Gangubai recites Sahir Ludhianvi's lyrics "Jinhe Naaz Hai Hind Par" from *Pyaasa* (1957) and in doing so, reiterates its trenchant critique of nationalism's failed promises. Bhansali uses film to orient us; in other words, we know what time period it is via the references to cinema as opposed to political events. We could also argue that Bombay cinema is thus positioned as a competitor of the state, an alternate site for the historiography of the nation, which becomes even more salient in light of contemporary debates on the content of school children's Indian history textbooks.[9]

However, Bhansali does not just quote Bombay cinema to critique the nation-state or nationalist leaders; he also points to and reworks problematic representations *within* Bombay cinema. In *Pyaasa*, a melancholic, cynical Prem/Guru Dutt sings "Jinhe Naaz Hai Hind Par" as we watch abject sex workers being ogled, harassed and molested by men. However, in this film, Gangubai, a brothel madam and political figure, quotes these lines in a conversation with the incumbent Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to advocate for the rights of fellow sex workers, whom she defines as citizens also entitled to the nation's protection. If the sex workers in *Pyaasa* are pitiable and exploited, then the sex workers in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* are citizen-subjects who demand to be included within the legitimate bounds of the city and then the nation via their access to political and material rights.

The majority of the song sequences in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* do not appear as diegetic performances where actors onscreen lip-sync or dance in song-and-dance sequences, an earlier convention within Bombay cinema. The song sequences in the film nevertheless perform a crucial role as they connect the sex workers on screen to the far more glamorous construction of the Islamicate courtesan and establish the sex workers' identities as Gujarati migrants. They also distinguish Gangubai's distinct upper-class origins from the sex workers and her subsequently greater ease in navigating more public and cosmopolitan contexts outside Kamathipura. Finally, the song sequences cite other well-known film songs from Sanjay Leela Bhansali's earlier films, and in doing so, they situate the otherwise risqué story of a sex worker who crusades for sex workers' rights firmly within the big budget, mainstream industry of Bollywood—and define the protagonist's resistance to patriarchy and social norms as heroic.

The qawwali "Shikayat" features the one professional vocal performance in the film, pictured on an extravagantly dressed Huma Qureshi as a qawwal accompanied by her female party. The female gawwali ensemble itself hearkens back to a number of filmic precedents, including the women's qawwali from the quintessential Islamicate courtesan tale, Mughal-e-Azam's "Teri Mehfil Mein Kismat Azmakar." In this film we watch the performance, alongside Gangubai, at her ex-lover's wedding, along with Gangubai herself—while collapsing our own view of the stage as the viewers, the suggested audience for an Islamicate courtesan performance, and offering us the same view as Gangubai's own view. Here we draw on Mukul Kesavan and Marshall Hodgson's notion of the "Islamicate" to denote the fraught relationship between those societies and cultures that people most often call "Islamic," and the construction of that notion outside the actual practice of Islam as religion. Within the Islamicate, we recognize the lyrics' Urdu inflections and Persianate poetic conventions, and we recognize the courtesan from the 16th Mughal and 18th and 19th century Lakhnavi cultures as one and the same—at least on screen; they correspond to a precedent filmic stylization, as opposed to a concrete referent. We recognize the



Huma Qureshi in *Gangubai*, Madhuri Dixit as Chandramukhi in *Devdas* (2002) Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022); Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Devdas* (2005).



A theatrical framing of the qawaali, "Shikayat"/ "Complaint." Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022).



Gangubai, the matchmaker and wedding guest, and Afshaan, her former lover, watching the performance of the qawwali "Shikayat" during the wedding. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022).



In Pakeezah (1972), the tawaif Sahibjaan (played

Sufi qawwali. Visually, the sets, choreography, and extravagant costumes recall those of Madhuri Dixit's resplendent Chandramukhi and her brothel in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's own *Devdas* (2002)—but through the figure of the qawwal, who in her performance of the qawwali somehow also evokes the stylized coquettishness that we associate with the mujra's filmic presentation of kathak dance.

Shikayat's lyrics describe a woman's pain at her lover having left her for another woman, and the slight consolation she finds in rumors that suggest that her former lover may still care for her. The lyrics take on additional resonance in the context of the film's plot—where Gangubai herself has sacrificed her love and engineered her own breakup, as well as her lover Afsan's marriage to another woman—during which she watches this performance.

As Gangubai and her lover watch the performance from the audience, we are made to understand that the courtesan on stage is a stand-in for her, the sex worker—thereby creating a scenario in which a courtesan performs for her own lover's wedding to another woman, which of course recalls the other quintessential courtesan film Pakeezah's "Teer-e-Nazar Dekhenge," where Sahibjaan dances at her lover's wedding to another woman. The collapse between Gangubai and the courtesan on the stage here is notable in its attempt to conflate the tawaif – the historical courtesan in an Islamicate setting, trained in classical poetry, dancing, and singing and catering to elite audiences in an upscale, elite space, and the common prostitute or randi in the film—a sex worker often far away from home, uneducated, poor, and forced to work in appalling conditions. As the daughter of a barrister, Gangubai would never have been trained like a courtesan in poetry, dancing, and singing—because her family would never have permitted somebody from her social class to perform in public. As a respectable family, they forbid her to pursue her dream to act in films and provoke her running away from home.

That blurring between the Islamicate courtesan and the sex worker also occurs more indirectly with the lyrics of the songs "Jab Saiyaan" and "Meri Jaan," both of which draw on standard tropes in an anachronistic Persianate-Urdu poetic tradition—with lovers being compared to open flames, romantic passion being described in terms of nature and intoxication, the latter making an explicit nod to Umrao Jaan's "In Aankhon Ki Masti," where Umrao describes how her eyes intoxicate and seduce her lovers. The musical style of the second song, "Meri Jaan," recalls the lighthearted, flirtatious cabaret songs with a westernized tinge from the 1950s and early 1960s such as Geeta Dutt's "Babuji Dheere Chalna" from Aar Paar (1954). Even if Gangubai herself is never featured as a solo singer, the lyrics sonically superimposed on her scenes signal indirectly that Gangubai is not only acquainted with Gujarati folk traditions but also potentially versed in Urdu poetic conventions and cosmopolitan influences—perhaps a regular visitor to spaces such as cabaret bars traditionally restricted to the upper class, featuring western jazz-influenced music. Gangubai herself never lip-syncs or sings as a solo vocalist on screen, but these songs' lyrics' personae are linked to Gangubai through the montage of her blossoming romance—in the less glamorous space of Gangubai's brothel, and inside her car.

Two songs in the film draw attention to Gangubai and her brothel's sex workers' origins outside Bombay—and their identity as migrants. The initial song, "Jhume Re Gori," performed by Ganga and her friends on the Hindu occasion of Navratri, presents *garba*, a distinctly Gujarati (and Hindu) form of dance. This song's

by Meena Kumari) is asked to dance at the wedding of her former lover, who initially falls in love with her after seeing her beautiful feet. After smashing a glass chandelier onto the floor, she dances frenetically on top of the broken glass, and leaves a trail of blood. Source: Kamal Amrohi, *Pakeezah* (2009).



A romantic scene between the two lovers in the song sequence, "Jaab Saiyaan," set within the shabby confines of the brothel. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).



Another romantic scene between the two lovers in the backseat of Gangubai's Bentley, in which she offers her foot to her lover in the song "Meri Jaan." In the film *Pakeezah*, a man falls in love with a sleeping tawaif on a train after he catches a glimpse of her beautiful feet. The foregrounding of the foot here gestures toward that film. However flirtatious, this interaction seems to foreshadow that this couple, like the tawaif and her lover in *Pakeezah*, will also have a tragic end. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).

tempo, melody, and vocal timbres recall the Rajasthani-tinged "Ghoomar," in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's previous film Padmaavat (2018), and in both cases, these respective songs attempt to situate the young women onscreen as morally upstanding and marriageable girls, who adhere to the local region's respective values and traditions. Garba as a genre also appears in the song "Nagada Sang Dhol "in Bhansali's previous film Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram-Leela (2013), where it signals a young Gujarati girl's adherence to tradition and while hinting at what will be her eventual break from it. Later in Gangubai Kathiawadi, Gangubai and her brothel's sex workers perform another garba, the exuberant "Dholida," amid the neighborhood's streets, which for one evening are magically transformed from a dilapidated slum into a festive setting, illuminated by endless garlands of lights. "Dholida," which starts happily, accompanies Gangubai's dancing, which then becomes increasingly frenetic until she almost collapses at its end—once again gesturing toward Sahibjaan's frenzied dance in Pakeezah's "Teer-e-Nazar Dekhenge" as well as Leela's delirious turns in "Nagada Sang Dol" in Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela.

As such, the song redirects our focus on the workers' connection to their Gujarati heritage to Gangubai's own plight. Given this film's setting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, we consider this articulation of Gujarati identity within the Bombay state's then recent historical dissolution in 1960 and subsequent division into the contemporary states of Maharashtra and Gujarat on the basis of Marathi and Gujarati language, respectively. After Bombay was ceded to Maharashtra as its capital, large numbers of Gujarati and Marwari residents stayed within the city, where they continue to dominate the domain of business and to affirm their own claims to the city—often to Maharashtrians' consternation.

We wish to call attention to how Gangubai's voice helps construct her presence. The fact that Gangubai never sings a solo song in the film points to her public presence's refusal to conform to the ways that we are accustomed to—in the form of tawaifs, cabaret singers, or nautch girls performing on the stage. For her to perform a solo song onscreen would blur her distinction from the other sex workers, who continue to service male clients in the brothel, in the present. In this sense, it is essential that the diegetic solo performance in this film in the qawwali is picturized on somebody else, whose stylized performance is out of place, outside of time, and genre. On the other hand, Gangubai embodies a woman who is public in the political sphere.[10] Bhansali's decision to never have Gangubai sing a solo forces us to acknowledge how she comes to reclaim her voice and agency from being objectified within the domain of sex work and public performance as she develops the capacity to advocate for her larger community, and to articulate its residents' otherwise silenced needs.

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In the song sequence "Dholida," Gangubai and the brothel's workers take the night off to dance the Gujarati garba in the now resplendent streets as they celebrate Navratri, a nine-day Hindu holiday that honors the goddess Durga. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).



(Public) spaces, cities, and citizenry

Gangubai Kathiawadi's sets draw attention to the organization of spaces in Bombay, their fraught relation to one another, and the competing demands of its residents. Setting, here, doesn't function as a silent background. Rather, it forces us to reflect on the divergent communities that lay a claim to Bombay both then and now. Here, cinema has a dual function: it is both part of the city's landscape and represents the city on screen. By putting film theaters in the same neighborhood as brothels, the film nudges us to think about the relationship between these two sites. What does the history of cinema look like if we think of sex workers as its audiences? How does cinema figure in the life of the brother workers? What does film theory look like if we imagine the sex worker as the intended spectator? How have courtesans and sex workers been represented in film? Does the courtesans and sex workers' relocation from the brothel to the theatrical screen consolidate or pressure norms and hierarchies of social and public spaces? Gangubai's assertion that the brothel doesn't discriminate against caste, class and religion suggests that the brothel is a democratic and inclusive place. Is the theater also an inclusive place?

In a nuanced article on the Dalit actress, Rosy, Bindu Menon points to both policing of the theatrical screen and screen audiences. According to Menon, cinema, by moving the Dalit performer from street to the screen jostled ideas about which spaces Dalits could occupy. Menon and other scholars have shown that the space of the theater was often regulated to ensure that classes, castes and genders did not mix.[11] [open endnotes in new window] Bhansali's film confirms these arguments by showing that Gangu and her friends are sexually harassed by a young man when they try to enter theater. Thus, they are positioned as objects of pleasure, not subjects or workers who can enjoy a day off. By slapping and shoving aside the harasser, Gangu asserts her rights as a woman and a citizen, who has a claim to the city and its spaces.[12]

The film's ongoing focus on the convent school adjacent to the sex workers' neighborhood also performs a crucial role in defining sex workers who reside in the city of Bombay as politically conscious, committed residents with legitimate claims to their city—even if they are, as in the case of many sex workers including Gangubai, female migrants from elsewhere, or people occupying other marginalized and disenfranchised identities, such as being Muslim, being a hijra[13], or being destitute. The women under Gangubai's leadership recognize the essential service they provide to the rest of the city and therefore demand

- that the convent school accept their daughters as students and develop their capacities as future citizens of the nation, legitimately entitled to an education:
- that they work in safe conditions;
- · that their homes not be demolished, and their population displaced; and
- that they be represented within municipal politics through electing a person within their peers.

It is these women's demands for representation and greater rights at the municipal level that attracts the attention of others outside Kamathipura and transforms their local, neighborhood-based struggle into a larger struggle to



Gangu's first appearance advocating for sex workers is at a political rally, where she gives a political speech over the radio. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022)



The brothel and theater are opposite one another. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).



Photos of stars are visible in many places in the brothel, which asks us to consider how sex workers constitute cinema audiences. Workers here do their make-up under a calendar featuring Nargis, which gestures to the importance of cinema, representations of female stars—and the distance of the women's lives from these representations. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).

define the legitimate citizens of the nation. The convent school's prim and self-righteous leaders as well and relatively recent establishment in the area define the institution as a recently arrived interlopers to the true residents of Bombay, comprising working-class people who have occupied that area for generations. The tension between the convent school's leaders and Gangubai serve to delineate Gangubai's moral authority and the development of her political power—through her campaigns against discrimination, her advocacy for workers' rights, and her protecting the neighborhood from politically corrupt officials who would destroy their homes and livelihood and cede the neighborhood to greedy developers. Her leadership in these campaigns establish the authenticity and depth of her political alliance with the downtrodden.

With respect to portraying the true residents of Bombay, Bhansali's casting in this film seems to deliberately question the conventional (and often problematic) representations of underrepresented groups. To start with the most obvious, Gangubai presents a brave Hindu woman who sacrifices her own desires for the benefit of her community—a familiar narrative, insofar as *Mother India* defines it. Gangu sacrifices the great love of her life—her young, earnest, and handsome Muslim lover for the good of her community when she runs for election. In *Padmavaat*, Bhansali's previous film, the Hindu queen asks for her husband's consent to sacrifice through *jauhar* her own life as well as the lives of the female members of her court[14]—with her husband's consent, to prevent their Hindu purity from being besmirched by Muslim invaders. In this biopic, we have no fierce Hindu warrior queen defending her kingdom from Muslim invaders—whether Padmavati, or Manikarnika (the Rani of Jhansi,) the subject of a number of recent biopics.

Rather, what Bhansali does is to give us a multitude of Muslim characters—who embody and recall some established cinematic stereotypes but also question them, because the film offers us different kinds of Muslims-something rarely seen in contemporary cinema. Our Islamicate courtesan/ sex worker hero seems to carry on the elegant tradition of tawaifs' poetry, as portrayed in Umrao Jaan, or more recently in Dedh Ishqiya's (2014) Begum Para, and Saba, the poetess in Ae Dil Hai Mushkil (2016). The bogeyman of the lascivious Muslim invader in Padmavaat is simultaneously replaced by an innocent young Muslim man, utterly devoted to her and making no issue of the social stigmas around her profession, and a vicious Muslim Paathan ruffian who brutalizes Gangubai—before he is in turn disciplined and beaten by his boss, a Muslim crime boss who takes Gangubai as his rakhi[15] sister and solemnly vows to protect her. The gentle, elderly tailor who looks at Gangubai as if he were her uncle is also Muslim. While nearly everybody in the neighborhood is either Muslim or Hindu, that difference in affiliations do not seem to affect how they relate to each other—in obvious contrast to the present, where Hindu nationalists construct religious difference as the key political and cultural problem.

Even more interesting, the boyfriend at the start who deceives and abandons her is Hindu, as is the man who initiates her entry into prostitution, as is finally her



Gangubai and the other women prepare to attend the cinema, now under a picture of Suraiya, a star popular during the 1940s. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).



Gangubai visits the convent school to ensure that her workers' children can be enrolled and receive the education she believes they are entitled to. She is indignant when the convent school's officials deny those children a place in the school due to their mothers' occupation and social standing. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022).



Alia Bhatt's appearance is notably different from those of the other actresses portraying workers in the brothel. In many scenes, she appears to be illuminated while the others blend into the shadows. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022).

family who refuses to recognize her when she attempts to contact them for the first time on the telephone. The brothel madam Sheela Maasi's own religion is never clearly defined; she not called Sheela Khala, which would suggest her being Muslim, nor does she wear a tikka—which Gangu herself wears prominently. Finally, the marriage Gangu arranges between her Muslim lover and her sex worker friend's Hindu daughter is an inter-religious union that then results in a happy and successful union. Given that Gangubai herself is a sex worker, the film forbids the Hindu right from co-opting her figure as paragon of Hindu femininity, as Padmavati, the protagonist of Bhansali's previous film, the warrior queen Manikarnika. and Radha in *Mother India* have been.

The characters Razia and Amin Faizi are also Muslim characters, but they are coded in unconventional ways. Razia, who is Gangu's main political rival in Kamathipura, is a *hijra*. Her femininity is never called into question throughout the film, but her clothing is tawdry—shiny but cheap, and what we might imagine a lower-class *mujra* dancer outside the city may wear. As a political leader, she draws on her 13th-century historical namesake—Razia Sultana, the first Muslim female ruler in the Indian subcontinent, and the only female Muslim ruler of Delhi. Her social status as a Muslim *hijra* is just as if not more marginalized and denigrated than that of the sex workers, which is likely enough to forge solidarity. It is significant that the actor playing Razia, Vijay Raaz, also appears alongside Alia Bhatt in another recent film, Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* —as an older Muslim man who is marginalized and disenfranchised on account of his being Muslim.

The journalist Amin Faizi who helps Gangubai find a more public platform for her advocacy is also Muslim, and he is described as working for an Urdu newspaper—but does not seem to correspond to any stock stereotypes associated with Muslim characters onscreen. His respect for Gangubai's advocacy is genuine, and he appears to be secular. Other than his writing in Urdu and his name, nothing explicitly defines his religious identity. Faizi is refined in his affect and a gentleman who treats Gangu with the same respect as he would anybody else of consequence. His lighter-complexioned skin and refinement also distinguish him from the other characters in the film—but not on account of his being Muslim. (In some ways, his characterization seems to draw on the external star text of the actor Jim Sarbh, who plays Faizi, and Sarbh's Parsi background.)

The women who play the sex workers in the film, with the exception of Alia Bhatt herself, do not look like the conventional women we see in contemporary Bollywood films—willowy, fair-skinned young women who often enter the film industry through commercial modeling. The women who play the other sex workers in the film have darker complexions and are groomed to suggest that they are not upper middle- or upper-class women, but ordinary working women—a nod towards realism. Alia Bhatt's own appearance in the film alongside these women seems to further distinguish her identity as somebody who, unlike them, is originally from an upper-class family. Her exceptionally light-colored skin inherently orients her with the beautiful Islamicate courtesan, with Persian or other foreign origins, as well as with early Bombay film's original female actors who did in fact come from the courtesan tradition as well as mixed heritages (a nod to Alia Bhatt's hybrid genealogy, Gujarati, Kashmiri, British, and German).

By populating the screen with diverse residents of Bombay, *Gangubai* reconstructs the pasts of city, cinema, and nation, and thereby, challenges the present chauvinist logics of Shiv Sena and Hindu nationalism, which define "Mumbai" as the home of Hindu Marathas, and India as the rightful residence of Hindus respectively. The film closes with white confetti, posters of Gangubai, celebratory sounds of political victory, amidst it all, a jubilant Gangubai standing on a float, proclaiming a sex worker as a hero and Kamathipura's denizens as legitimate residents of Bombay. This is a triumphant ending—and a complex one.

Mise-en-scène and soundtrack expertly pull together elements of a victorious political rally such as confetti, cheering crowds, posters, and a float. A conspicuous missing element is flags. The lack of flags ensures that Gangubai is not linked with any political party. Other curious elements of the mise-en-scène include Gangubai's attire, accessories, and gestures. The red-white Bengali sari, the red *bindi*, bangles, mehndi and wavy hair, garland, and hand gesture signal invoke a dizzying set of associations from different registers: the Baul singer from *Pyaasa* in "Aaj Sanam Mohe Ang Laga Lo"/ "My Beloved Hold Me Today," Paro in Bhansali's *Devdas*, Vidya in *Kahaani* (2012), politicians, female gurus, and Hindu goddesses. By combining these elements on the body of a sex worker, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* questions 'reel' and 'real' discourses that locate these women in separate, tiered worlds. In doing so, it forcefully expands the frames of cinema and nation.





Gangubai and the residents of Kamathipura celebrate her political victory at the film's end. Her white and red sari invokes the red-bordered white saris Bengali married women wear during Durga Puja, the festival to honor Durga. It is likely not an accident that Gangubai's waving to her supporters evokes the mudra (symbolic gesture) of the raised left hand associated with the goddess Durga—abhaya, which signals protection and fearlessness. The sari that Gangubai wears is identical to the sari worn by Bengali Durga devotee, Paro, in Bhansali's previous film Devdas (2002) in her dramatic final scene. Source: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022)

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Notes

- 1. Islamicate culture refers to the filmic stylizations of Muslim-dominated court cultures. We discuss this at greater length on p. 2. [return to page 1]
- 2. According to the 1950s-60s exchange rates, this would have been approximately 210.
- 3. For articles that examine *Bandit Queen*, see Mariet D'Souza Shanthie & Bibhu Prasad Routray, " *Bandit Queen*: Cinematic representation of social banditry in India, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 26:4, 688-701, 2015, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2015.1050822; Reema Chowdhary & Nirmala Menon, "Biopics as Visual Palimpsest: Mapping Social Hegemonies in *Bandit Queen*", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 35:8, 770-786, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2017.1381005
- 4. In traditional Hindu practice, a red bindi is worn by married women. In contemporary India, while many women do wear a red bindi to signal their marital status, a red bindi is also worn as an accessory to match with an outfit.
- 5. Nargis was a famous 1950s Bombay cinema actress. She was the daughter of Jaddanbai, who was a courtesan. She had a very public affair with the already married Raj Kapoor. She broke off the affair subsequently marrying her co-star from *Mother India*, Sunil Dutt. She later became a member of Parliament. Her life like Gangubai's testifies to the various shades of white.
- 5a. The social was a mammoth genre that emerged in the 1950s in Bombay cinema. This genre attempted to address social problems e.g. dowry, caste, mistreatment of women, family differences, class inequities etc..
- 5b. The Muslim social represented social concerns of Muslims and located these concerns in Islamicate settings. In doing so, this genre separated the Muslim concerns from the ones staged in the unmarked social, which centered on Hindu characters. The Muslim social often represented Muslims as nawabs and presented veiled Muslim women.
- 6. For a detailed account of the white sari, see Anupama Prabhala, "Women in White: Femininity and Female Desire in 1960s Bombay Cinema" in *Film, Fashion, and the 1960s*, edited by Eugenia Paulicelli, Drake Stutesman, and Louise Wallenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 149–168.
- 7. Another inquiry into this film might compare the star-texts of Amitabh Bachchan and Alia Bhatt. *Deewar* is one of Bachchan's signature films from the 1970s, which both made him a superstar and built his star image as a working class hero. Bachchan's success had much to do with the scripts of Salim and Javaid who brought to life the anger and frustrations of the marginalized working class. In Bhatt's case, her remarkable performance in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* appears at a time when women-centric films are successful; this success is in part due to movements and initiatives taken by women in the film industry as well as

those outside it. [return to page 2]

- 8. For a discussion on the courtesan genre, see, Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Popular Indian Cinema*, 1947-1987 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).
- 9. Nationalist historiography focuses on elite political leaders and their plans for modernizing and improving post-independence India. Post economic liberalization in the 1990s, the Hindu nationalist governments have sought to excise or demonize Muslims and narrate the tale of India from the vantage point of a masculinist Hindu view. The current Hindu nationalist government has been working on changing history textbooks to reflect such a view. Gangubai challenges both elite and exclusionary politics of post-independence and Hindu nationalist leaders respectively as she co-exists and builds alliances with various marginalized communities.
- 10. Bhansali's decision to not have Gangubai sing a solo has to be understood in the context of the courtesan genre. In this genre, the courtesan is a performer and (public) singing defines her social identity. By ensuring that Gangubai does not have a solo, Bhansali shifts our understanding of voice part and parcel of constructing sex work as spectacle as visualized in "Shikayat." Instead, here, sex work is associated with political speech and demands for a constituency's rights.
- 11. For another thoughtful discussion on cinema halls see, S.V. Srinivas, "Is there a Public in the Cinema Hall?," *Framework*, Vol.42, Issue 3, 2000. [return to page 3]
- 12. Here, Gangu reminds us of Alia Bhatt's earlier avatar of the assertive Mumbai girl, Safeena Firdausi in Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* (2019). Akhtar's representation of a Bombay Muslim girl is novel and refreshing much like Bhansali's Gangubai.
- 13. *Hijra* is the name given to South Asia's long-established community of people who have traditionally identified themselves as being neither a man or a woman, but belonging to a third gender. They are not necessarily transgender. Stigmatized and criminalized under British colonial law, they still struggle to be accepted and sometimes rely on begging and sex work to supplement their meager income as performers.
- 14. *Jauhar* refers to the historical practice of Hindu women burning themselves *en masse* in the face of imminent defeat and capture, to avoid their being taken captive and raped by foreign invaders.
- 15. *Rakhi* refers to the bracelet with an amulet or talisman that a Hindu woman ties on her biological brother's wrist, or the wrist of a man that she has chosen as her protector. Here that relationship transcends communal lines.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Establishing shot of Mumbai.





Representation of Indian weddings to set the template for the show.

The fault does not lie in the stars. Indian Matchmaking and gender representations

by Ishita Tiwary

In the summer of 2020, in the early stages of the pandemic, like many others I got even more hooked to binge watching as a way of coping with the uncertainty and the stress of the world around us. I discovered a new-found appreciation for and morbid fascination with reality television. One such show, which seemed to be generating headlines, was *Indian Matchmaking* (2020/dir. Smriti Mudra) on Netflix. It was also the show that I had earlier been most resistant to watching. Because its narrative featured a "suitable girl" whose parents were on the lookout to get her "settled," the show's premise seemed to hit too close to home. Born and raised in South Asia and currently residing in North America, I found myself surprised that everybody around me not from that region seemed to be obsessing about the show and bombarding me with queries about the arranged marriage process in India.

With my curiosity now piqued, going against my own instincts, I grudgingly start watching *Indian Matchmaking*. My first impression of the show was how particular phrases were often used—"the girl has to be flexible," "she should adjust, compromise," "willing to be flexible, compromise," "Isn't marriage compromise?" These statements presented the thesis of the show wrapped in a glossy aesthetic. It has a mise-en-scene that highlights the lives of the uber-rich. It is either set in India, or it shows the tall skyscrapers in the United States where privileged immigrants reside. Cinematographically, it uses soft focus and soft lighting to frame the mid-shot talking heads. The aesthetic gives a veneer of glamour to the practice of arranged marriage.

As I noted, I was resistant to watching *Indian Matchmaking*. For many of my friends and me, the show was painful to watch as it reinforced the status quo of gender and caste hierarchies, was obsessed with the "fair skin" of a prospective match, and seemed to villainize the highly successful, independent women on the show. The show served as a manifestation of an institution that my friends and I actively work to resist, despite the intense familial pressures we face.

Curiously, or rather frustratingly, many of my non-Indian friends in North America loved the show and were puzzled by my resistance to arranged marriage as they found it a reasonable mode of dating and finding a match. This reception startled me, and made me go back to look at the coverage of the show in India. Going through the news coverage and social media, it was clear that many women found the show triggering in the way it reduced representations of intelligent, ambitious, successful women to a set of stereotypical adjectives and how it glorified arranged marriage as a harmless, quirky alternative to dating. Reception of the show in India was one of horror, at least amongst the small progressive



An example of talking heads.

elite. When discussing the show online, they circulated the hashtag #cringebinge. [1] [open endnotes in new window] One of the male contestants, for example, Vyasar, admitted that the show was "painful to watch" in the way it discussed and represented the women on screen. [2]

The show's refusal to address caste was also noticed by commentators. It was noted that by,

"coding caste in harmless phrases such as 'similar backgrounds,' 'shared communities,' and 'respectable families,' the show does exactly what many upper-caste Indian families tend to do when discussing this fraught subject: 'It makes caste invisible.'"[3]

The show's director, Smriti Mudhra argues that the show does acknowledge the participants' anxieties and discomfort with the process, in the way the camera pans repeatedly to the uncertainty or scepticism on their faces, or zooms in on clenched hands that tell their own story.[4] And most people who watch reality television enjoy its fantastic situations. As one viewer noted,

"It is a reality show, with the emphasis on show as much as on reality. So, let's cut the producers some slack for giving in to commercial considerations and making it more a drama than documentary." [5]

Such comments illustrate how understanding the representational strategy of the show is crucial to understanding its reception and critique. As I will argue, the tension between the show's form and reception indicates that its mode of address is oriented towards a western audience. My own reception of the show and discussion of it across social media and Indian think pieces seem to confirm this orientation. However, the show's genre nature and popularity escape an intense level of scrutiny.

The contours of arranged marriage in India are shaped by gender politics. The woman is subject to judgement and has to show her willingness to make the marriage work. *Indian Matchmaking* is set up in this way to elicit such a judgmental audience reading of gender expectations. Thus, to explicate a gender analysis of *Indian Matchmaking*, one needs to look at how notions of Indian womanhood are constructed in popular discourse and what role these concepts of "womanhood" play within the domestic and conjugal sphere. Seeing these notions as ideological is key in order to understand the arranged marriage setup in India and the way it is explicated in the show's universe. Such an analysis is useful because it also clues us in more generally to how women are represented in Indian film and media.

The construction of Indian womanhood in popular anti-colonial and colonial discourses hinges on the woman being a representation of tradition and nation

feminine sphere, where tradition is maintained by women through female modesty, dress codes, and the use of a vernacular idiom in the "natural" habitat of home (Chatterjee, 1989; Kaviraj 1989). This notion of womanhood is constructed through both the imagination of and the social enforcement of the conjugal sphere, hence the importance of marriage in Indian society. Although instances of love marriages are on the rise, arranged marriages are still the status quo. 90% of marriages in India still go through this route. Arrangements are made now through the aid of matrimonial columns in newspapers, matrimonial apps and websites, family priests, relatives, neighbours or the "matchmaking aunty."[6] In that case, a matchmaking aunty is either a professional or an acquaintance of the family on the lookout for a prospective match for their friends' daughters/sons. Using her social and kinship networks, this matchmaking aunty facilitates potential conjugal matches for the families to evaluate.

(Mani, 1989; Chakravarti, 1989). The site of the home in this discourse is seen as a

In *Indian Matchmaking*, this role is taken on by the lead protagonist Sima Taparia. The matchmaking aunty facilitates conversation between two prospective matches and their families. Significantly, in the arranged marriage setup, marriage means not only as the coming together of two individuals but also two families. Hence social stakes are high, minimally reinforcing the status quo, optimally consolidating wealth and kinship structures. Thus, *Indian Matchmaking* schoice of having the matchmaking aunty as the protagonist is canny. She functions as the distant observer yet is somebody who knows the practice intimately. This role, especially as a protagonist for a reality show, aids in helping viewers, unfamiliar with the cultural context to get a base understanding of how arranged marriages function in India.

As an Indian film and media studies scholar residing in Canada, when thinking of *Indian Matchmaking* aesthetically, textually, and in terms of its reception, I find it especially useful to turn towards intersectionality as a critical framework. Intersectionality, a term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2000), has been a method for understanding the simultaneity of multiple influences on the experiences of women of color. That is, as Isabel Molina-Guzmán and Lisa Marie Cacho (2014) note, feminist media scholarship has increasingly embraced the concept of "intersectionality" to discuss how race, class, gender, and sexuality



The main character and matchmaker—Sima Taparia.

need to be analysed in relation to one another rather than as either individual or additive identities. They argue that intersectional feminist media scholarship can be applied to an increasingly diverse, global, and digitally networked world. As an analytic methodology, intersectionality can also be used to examine how structures of domination intersect, such as race and heteropatriarchy.

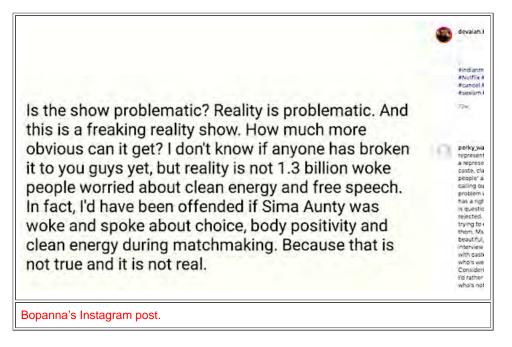
In a post-colonial context, Radhika Parameswaran (2001), through ethnographic work in India demonstrates how gender as a category is informed by local and global culture and explains ow understanding gender in the Indian context must be further problematized through the intersection of class/caste, religious, and political identities. Parameswaran and other postcolonial feminist media scholars look at the global flows of gender through an intersectional lens to illustrate how analyses of gender must take into account gendered and racialized discourses and the geopolitical spaces in which cultural texts are produced and interpreted. Intersectionality will thus be the key intellectual vector through which I unpeel the layers of this show's representational politics.

Arranged marriages are preferred in the Indian community especially because the practice reinforces societal status quos of caste, class, religious and gender hierarchies. That this ideology is internalized is evinced in the show when participants express their desire to be matched with somebody from their own community so they will have similar cultural backgrounds. For example, Aparna, a successful lawyer and a diasporic Indian, expresses a desire to be matched to somebody from the Sindhi[7] community as she herself is Sindhi, or Akshay's mother, who resides in India, wants her prospective daughter in law to hail from the same caste. Even though we see women as active players on the show, later in the paper I will demonstrate that the hierarchies embedded in the arranged marriage setup are played out through the very body of the women participants. Moreover, the show hints at but glosses over the dark oppression embedded in not only in its gender representation but of its lack of addressing caste as well.

Indian Matchmaking was lauded for showcasing diverse portraits of women and for showcasing "in-your-face misogyny, casteism and colourism." (BBC, 2021)[8] As writer Devaiah Bopanna points out in an Instagram post, that is where show's merit lies" "Is the show problematic? Reality is problematic. And this is a freaking reality show." (Bopanna, 2020) [9] Intersectionality, thus, contributes to conceptualizing individual identity and subjectivity. In this case, Robin M. Boylorn (2008) notes, studies of reality television often focus on one issue and overlook a first-person account of the implications and representations of race, to which I would add gender and caste as well. There are entanglements between interpersonal experiences of gender, race, and ethnicity and how these relate to larger systems of power, oppression, and social privilege. Complexly, many individuals learn that if they understand the social construction of intersecting identities that can be differently performed from one setting to the next, they gain more space for individual empowerment.

Coming back to my own experience of watching the show, I found it triggering as it reinforced the conditioning that women in the society that I grew up in undergo since childhood. It also brought to mind a point in life where several of my friends and peers were undergoing the same personal struggle that I faced—of resisting traditional matchmaking and its harmful effects, of your personal and physical attributes constantly subject to harsh judgement, and of society deeming women and their families as failures if not successful in finding a good match. Furthermore, I watched the show while residing abroad. With grim irony for me, my friends and colleagues loved the show and wanted to know more about the practice, sometimes even valorising it. Some went so far as to offer to accompany me as a chaperone to meet "prospective matches."

I tell this autoethnographic reflection as a viewer because the reality depicted on the show stands in dialogue with my own lived experience. Thus, my discussion here is useful for me personally as a mode of critique. I understand that *Indian Matchmaking* presents a glossy, glamorized version of arranged marriages primarily meant for consumption by western audiences and wish to illustrate how this representation minimizes the real-world gender and caste politics of both the show and the practice itself. Here I examine the show's representational politics, provide a textual analysis, and trace the reception of the show and the Internet meme culture it generated.



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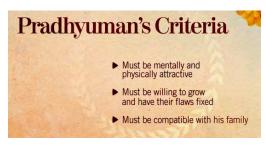


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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

List of criteria in wedding card form:



Must be mentally and physically attractive, must be willing to grow and have their flaws fixed, must be compatible with his family.



A pleasant demeanor, traveling or staying home, a similar or different background, must love dogs.

Miss/match

Stylistically, *Indian Matchmaking* looks like a glossy documentary series. The show focuses on characters from the diaspora as well as from India itself. Establishing shots of the cities preface the introduction of characters so as to key in viewers to the show's spatial reality. The characters are usually framed as talking heads or in mid shot/long mid shot as they converse with each other, bathed in soft key lighting and soft focus. When the characters list their criteria for a prospective match, a graphic in orange and pink tones resembling a wedding card pops up on screen and lists the desired attributes. If the prospective matches communicate via facetime/skype, the show uses that computer image to add authenticity to the conversation.





Establishing shot of Akshay's house.

Establishing shot of Mumbai.





Establishing shot of Austin, Texas.

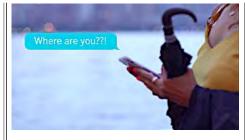
Establishing shot of New Jersey.





Talking head of Vyasar.

Talking head of Nadia.

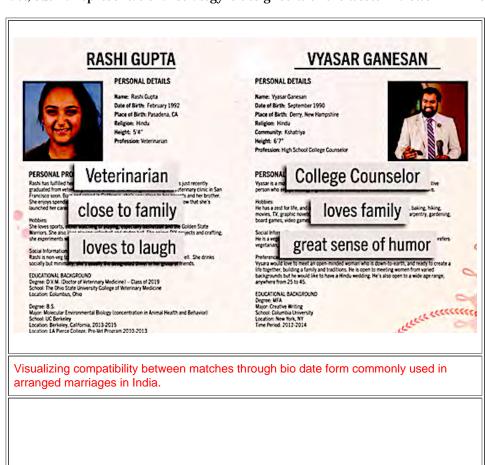


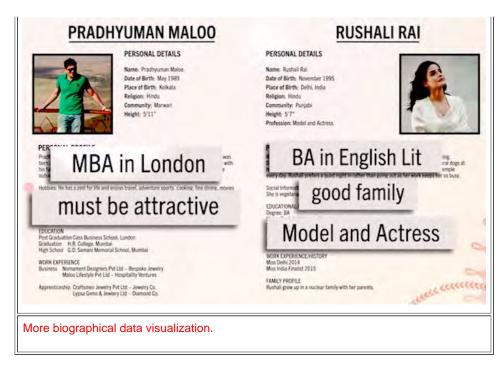


Text conversation between Nadia and her prospective match Vinay.

Video chat between Vyasar and Manisha.

I have numerous questions about how U.S. reality television, particularly a producer and creator who is diasporic, takes up another country's traditions. How does the genre format and this show's iteration of it affect the content or our understanding of the tradition? How does this depiction contest or reinforce gender hierarchies already existing in the practice of matchmaking? Can we see a tension that plays out between the show stylistics and its participants? What does this tension reveal? The concept of intersectionality provides me the language needed to analyze the events depicted and so to read television's relation to social and cultural inequalities. As Guzman and Cacho (2013) argue, intersectionality is an important interpretive framework to examine media production, its effects, and its audiences. In this essay, through an intersectional framework and a close look at the tension between style and content in *Indian Matchmaking*, I make clear the gender politics of the show and highlight how it makes caste invisible. In fact, such a representational strategy is designed with the western viewer in mind.





Historically, Indian media has played a crucial role in delineating and constructing gender relations and roles. As Purnima Mankekar (1999) points out, the state broadcasting unit Doordarshan[11] [open endnotes in new window] represented ideal Indian womanhood as essentially middle class with a life shaped by discourses on duty, family, and femininity.[12] However, Mankekar also notes that although these representations in the media seemed to reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, community, and nation, they sometimes opened spaces for subversive readings. In some ways, Indian Matchmaking partakes of this genealogy; however, since it's on Netflix, its representation of Indian womanhood is now seen on a global scale and funded by transnational capital. In the case of Doordarshan, the national broadcaster, the construction of womanhood was implicitly tied to idea of the nation; whereas in the case of Indian Matchmaking, the presence of transnational capital does two things. First, the definition of Indian womanhood now extends to the diasporas. Second, the construction and representation of "woman" is not tied to the idea of Indian nationhood, but made to be viewed by a transnational audience on the world's biggest streaming platform.

Throughout *Indian Matchmaking*, then, the voiceover of matchmaker Sima, functions as editorial voice. She guides viewers through the intricacies of matchmaking and explains the value of conjugality in Indian culture. She constantly reiterated ideas like these:

"marriage is between two families...one has to be willing to be flexible and compromise, things will go fast, rest is up to destiny."

Most Indian women heard such truisms growing up, and perhaps some, like me, have found it "triggering" when we encounter it represented and validated on screen. For instance, in one show, the mother of Akshay, (a man in his early 20s belonging to a rich Marwari[13] family, and hesitant to get married), is framed in a low angle that gives her an authoritative air; she declares,

"the girl has to adjust to many things...my house, my rules you have to follow."

Such a mantra of adjust and compromise reaches its logical conclusion when the matchmaker Geeta tells successful entrepreneur Ankita,



Akshay's mother Preeti listing her criteria for a suitable daughter in law: "The main thing for me is that the girl has to be a bit flexible."



Sima's matchmaker friend, Geeta, based in Delhi.



Numerologist being consulted.



Life coach being consulted.

"Isn't marriage compromise? Life is never equal...after marriage friends, family, everything takes a backseat...so it is our duty as women, the woman gives the emotional side of herself more than the man does."

Indian Matchmaking bills itself as reality television, and one appeal of reality television lies in the fact that it could be about the viewer or the viewer's neighbour (Huff, 2006) but in an exaggerated way. In fact, reality television ploughs into the emotions of the viewers in the way it is "routinely manipulated by scripted television." (ibid). Viewers expect the same things from reality programs they expected from scripted entertainment. Is it funny? Is it dramatic? Is it good? Viewers find place here where fiction and non-fiction cross over with documentary, news, etc., and the shows take on properties common to other genres (Hill, 2007). As I have illustrated, Indian Matchmaking evokes reality by using a documentary aesthetic, but the mining of emotions and the heightened drama created in finding the right match is closer to the aesthetics of scripted TV. [14] As one viewer noted about what she expected from the show,

"Reality is not 1.3 billion woke people worried about clean energy and free speech. In fact, I would have been offended if Sima Aunty had woken up and spoken about choice, body positivity and clean energy during matchmaking. Because that is not true and it is not real."[15] (Bopanna, 2020)

What reality is *Indian Matchmaking* representing? Perusing the coverage of the show, I notice how it is hailed as showcasing diverse portraits of Indian society and shining a light on harmful practices. As a viewer of the reality show, invested in this reality, I find it useful here to explore how I see this representation, split as I am between two worlds—India and abroad.

Growing up in New Delhi, India, my friends and I were aware of and derided the matrimonial column in newspapers where all the advertisements read the same:

"Wanted-slim, fair, tall, convent educated bride."

I saw that advertisement replicated in live action form on *Indian Matchmaking* where the matchmaker Sima Taparia says things like these:

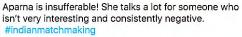
- The girl is a good match because she is "slim, trim, and educated."
- "In India we have to see caste, height, age, good family, good education."
- "In India don't say 'arranged marriage.' There is marriage and then there is 'love marriage.'"[16]

In addition, to indicate how she sticks to tradition, throughout the series, Sima consults astrologers, numerologists, and face readers to make matches or to assess the prospects a given pairing might have.







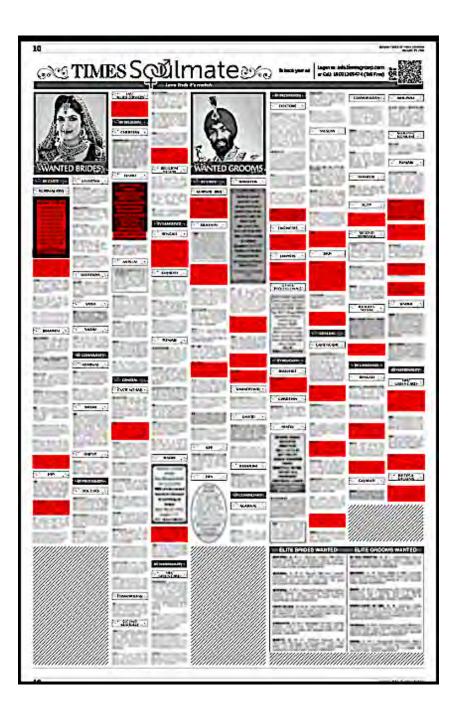




Meme on Twitter about how 'insufferable' Aparna is.



Contrary to such traditional thinking, my family dismisses such practices as archaic, boldly declaring that they do not happen. Consequently, my parents stopped watching the show. Though, it must be noted that my family belongs to a minority, most of our family's traditional circle espouse and endorse the traditional views on marriage and (un)subtly pressure them to push me to get 'settled' into matrimony. My peers in India relate how common these practices still are and the emotional hurdles they present as my friends try to find their own right match; facing the tradition as a social reality, these young women found the show distressing. Ostensibly, the show, in depicting this still powerful tradition, is shining a mirror to society through its diverse portraits of men and women trying to find a match. But the test case is how does the show deal with women who reject the tradition, who have a voice and are not afraid to ask for what they want? Such an instance is exemplified by Aparna, a participant who seemed to be constantly villainized by the show and thus by viewers as seen by their responses on social media.



HINDU/ AGARWAL/ UNMARRIED/ 29 YRS/ 6FT/ Very
handsome/ very fair/ Harvard Business School educated
well established entrepreneur from high status family
looking for tall, extremely beautiful and well educated
match from India & Abroad.
Whatsapp:
WANTED BRIDES>BY CASTE>AGARWAL-BISA
SEEKING matrimonial alliance for a fair and Beautiful Jatt
Sikh Girl, 1995 Born, 5'8, Doctor by Profession (MBBS). NZ
PR, Seeks well established businessman or Professionally
qualified well educated Tall Boy (aged between 25-29)
from well affluent settled family. Contact-
WANTED GROOMS>BY RELIGION>SIKH
29 /5'8" FAIR, AFFABLE, MAHARASHTRIAN, MBBS
DOCTOR, RUNNING COMPANY IN DIAGNOSTICS, WITH
MULTIPLE CENTRES IN MUMBAI SEEKS GENIAL
BEFITTING GRADUATE GIRL. Contact:
e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e
WANTED BRIDES>BY RELIGION>HINDU
WAINTED BRIDES > BY RELIGIOUS PRINDO
SM4 Sheikh Sunni V. Fair, Slim & Attractive, never married
36/5'2" Interior designing graduate girl. E:

A list of matrimonial advertisements that list attributes desired in a match. Source: CNN.

In the Indian Matchmaking, Aparna is presented as a highly educated and successful lawyer who has travelled across the world. Raised by a single mother, both she and her mother are clear on what they want. However, instead of showing her life and clarity about what she wants as a progressive ideal, the show's camerawork and editing techniques are consistently used to undercut Aparna and present her as unreasonable and inflexible. That is, as Aparna goes on dates on her quest to find the perfect match, her critique and attitude are constantly undercut by the show's stylistics. The camera lingers for a second longer at her distress as she makes a face or if she asserts her choices and point of view. The editing juxtaposes her viewpoint or her mother's against that of the matchmaker Sima, who consistently disapproves of them by uttering phrases such as, "She is educated so much, not accept anybody so easily" or "Aparna just has to be flexible." Aparna asserts she is being "perfectly reasonable" in specifying what constitutes a good match for her. But the camera work, editing, and such phrases together reveals the show's politics: a highly educated, opinionated, successful woman cannot find a suitable boy, as her success is her Achilles heel.





Another meme that is critical of Aparna's character. "I am going to create an environment that is so toxic."





Aparna's introduction: "Every day I'm sad I've only made it to 40 countries. How will I get to 41."

Aparna being critiqued by Sima: "She wants open-minded, she wants that, this."





"Many of these things are not very important...

...for a happy married life."





"But she has really high standards."

"But I feel she's a little stubborn."





"She is picky, and she will not decide."

"Aparna is very negative."

Aparna's Criteria

Indian-American of North Indian Descent

Not the funniest guy in the room
Should know Bolivia has salt flats
Passions outside of work
Active Father
No Lawyers

Indian-American of North-Indian descent; not the

Representations of gender and sexuality in entertainment tend to reinforce sexual difference and imbalances of power. (Carter et al, 2013). Arguments about media content and gender assert that it matters who produced/or created said media content. The gender of the producer/creator has some impact on the representations of women and men, of masculinity and femininity, become the basis for the stories told onscreen about what it means to be a woman or man in a specific time and place (ibid). *Indian Matchmaking*, directed by an Indian woman, featuring a female matchmaker as its narrator and main protagonist and streamed on the world's biggest streaming platform Netflix, reinforces this argument and complicates it as well. Ostensibly, we see diverse portraits of

funniest guy in the room; should know Bolivia has salt flats; passions outside of work; active father; no lawyers.

women and their situation, the show clearly has a gender bias and seems to uphold heteropatriarchy, In particular, it specifically rejects divorce.





Sima says, "But Aparna should not get a life partner if she is this negative."

Aparna's mother explains her past and her desire for her daughter to live a life where she has choices and makes her own decisions unlike herself who was forced into an arranged marriage by her parents.





Sima makes a simplistic explanation – attributing Aparna's pickiness to her mother's divorce instead of seeing it as a woman's empowered choice.

Aparna is censored because of her mother's divorced status: "Aparna is picky because of the divorce of her mother." Rather than presenting divorce as a progressive option or see here that a woman had the strength to walk out of a bad marriage and raise a successful daughter, the show treats divorce as a stigma. Yet such a condemnation only applies to the women of the show's universe. In contrast to Arpana, the male character Vyasar (a diasporic high school teacher) also has a divorced mother, and later the viewer finds out that his father is in prison on charges of conspiracy to murder. However, neither of these facts have a moral stigma; neither effects the show's judgement of him as a suitable match. Instead, the show is sympathetic to him.

Vyasar's introduction is framed in a montage set in his high school (differing from other characters' introduction where establishing shots of the city preface their introduction); we hear glowing testimonials from his student's thereby establishing him as an empathetic, good-natured man. When his potential matches don't work out, unlike those of Aparna, the show sympathizes with him. This is succinctly illustrated when Sima states, "Girls should be open minded and love him for who he is." Such a contrast between Aparna and Vyasar forcefully brings out the tension between the structuring and the seemingly progressive intent of the show. This show's construction reinforces gender differences and upholds the very status quo that matchmaking itself upholds.









Vyasar's introduction indicates his likability and social success.

Just as the show deals negatively with divorces, it sets impossible standards for women. In the case of Rupam, a divorced single mother, it is reiterated that because she is divorced, she needs to "compromise and adjust.... options are less." But the suspicion of divorce applies to men as well. This happened in an episode with Ankita, an independent woman and and clothing entrepreneur in Delhi. She gets set up on a date, which is framed in soft lighting and mid close and close up shots, giving the viewer the impression that the date went well and the match might have some promise. Moments later in the episode, the soundtrack signals a change in mood, the atmosphere is tense, and the camera movements become dynamic and jerky as we follow Ankita discovering something—the aesthetic mirroring her confusion and distress. Then, in a mid-long shot, we see her in a discussion with her sister, seemingly upset that she's just found out her match was previously married and is divorced. Such a revelation ends any chances of the match happening, and the way it is treated in the show reinforces the stigma around divorce and how it makes people "undesirable matches."





Sima advises, "You see, Rupam, because as a divorceé with a kid, it's a fact of life I'm telling you...

.....you will get less options...you have to compromise and you have to adjust to it."





Anitka goes on a pleasant date.

Later her mood drastically changes when

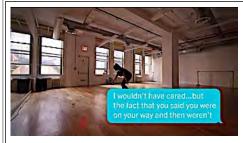
The show also cloaks caste politics. If we approach the uneven power relations in the experience of seeking a mate, we look for multiple and contradictory differences, focusing on understanding not only oppression but also privilege. For example, the frame of intersectionality helps understand how *Indian* Matchmaking represents the character of Nadia. Nadia is a diasporic character of Indian origin, whose family migrated from India to Guayana in the 1800s. Because of this complex set of origins, her "Indianness" is under question in the show. Sima expresses reservations by stating it will "be difficult to find a traditional Indian boy." Instead of confronting racial bias, the show glosses over it by its representation and presentation of Nadia. She is bathed in soft key lights and often filmed in movement through a series of long shots in her dance studio emphasizing her femininity and delicateness. In this representation, the viewer identifies in the character's quest to find the right match and actively roots for her, thus in the process forgetting the socio-political hurdles embedded for her to find the right match in an arranged marriage setup. The fact that this particular match is located in the diaspora also adds a layer to the blunting of the show's critique.





Family coming from Guayana places Nadia's "Indianness" in question.

The show does not challenge racism but instead presents her in a glamorous, feminine way.





In her dance studio.

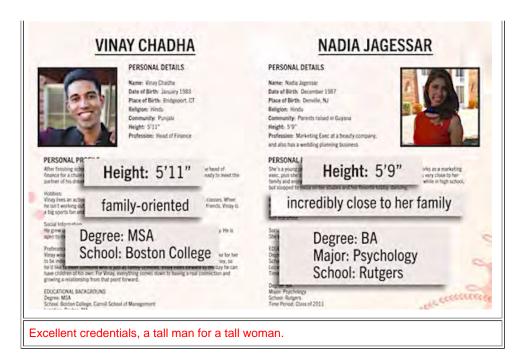
Elegantly framed at home.



Sindhi—a person from the Sindh region of Pakistan, formerly a part of India



Chalu—characterless, immoral.



Through its representing arranged marriages practices both within India and abroad, who is the viewer that the show is addressing itself too? Is the audience in India? The diasporic audience? The non-Indian, non-diasporic audience residing in the west? Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (2003) suggest that the value of diaspora—a term which at its most literal describes the dispersal and movement of populations from one particular national or geographic location to other disparate sites—lies in its critique of the nation form on the one hand, and its contestation of the hegemonic forces of globalization on the other. In representing the diaspora, the show not only cloaks the uglier side of arranged matchmaking, but also reinforces status quo as the characters wish to get matched up with somebody having similar religious, caste, and racial background. Moreover, the gaze of the show is oriented towards western audiences, especially in the way it selectively chooses to present and define elements of Indian culture within the show. Through a close reading of the show, I noted that the show defined terms such as "gujju," [17] "sindhi," "mandir," [18] "joint families," "CA," "nimit,"[19] and "roka." [20] To this list, I would like to add the terms that the show did not choose to define, such as "caste," "dowry," and "fair," to name a few. [21]

In this musical chairs of submission and omission, it is clear that the show is interested in teasing western audiences with the intricacies of arranged marriage but not plumb the depths of what this practice entails. Even though the show was lauded for having diverse portraits, it only focuses on the privileged, elite Indians—those who settled and made a life outside India and the rich within India. When representing the prospective matches in India, the show indulges in rich colors and slow pans and tilts to showcase the jewellery and the extravagance of the houses and the pomp of the marriage ceremony—following the stereotype of the great Indian wedding.[22] Through mode of address, the show's aesthetic strategy erases the harmful consequences of gender (heteropatriarchy) and caste disparities within the practice of arranged marriage. It wraps this practice up as a glossy, entertaining, and curiosity-laden object for consumption by a western audience.





Sumptuous ceremony for glossy entertaiment.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The stars get aligned: critiques of the show

Turning from a close analysis of the show itself, I would like to consider now the response to the show via its reception on social media, which had within them an element of critique.

In their chapter, "What is intersectionality," Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016), note that in discussing an intersectional critical framework one needs to take into account the "cultural domain of power" (pp 9), which emphasizes the increasing significance of culture and ideas in the organization of actual power relations (ibid). Now I would like delineate this cultural domain of power through the Internet meme culture spawned by the show. For example, in a memorable part of the show, Sima sets up Aparna to see an astrologer in the hopes that such a consultation would ward off the "negative energy" surrounding her, ultimately leading her to make a successful match. Taparia, the matchmaker, concludes by stating the now (in)famous line:

"Ultimately my efforts are meaningless if the stars are not aligned."







WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME WHY I'M

NOT MARRIED

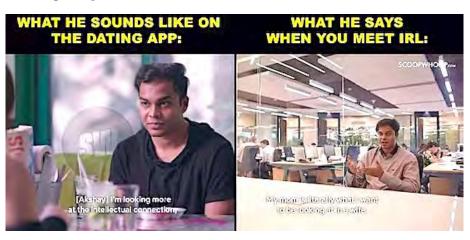
Examples of memes around the famous line.

This utterance led to spawning of countless memes across the Internet and aided in the global popularity of the show. [23] [open endnotes in new page] The explosion of memes across social media was an indicator of the massive success of the show. [24] The chatter on social media, generated by these memes, then prompted many think pieces on the show across global media. In this section, I focus on the reception of the show—through both think pieces and meme culture—and how it generates a critique of the gender dynamics and the gaps visible in the show.



Meme poking fun at the high expectations Indian parents have for their children.

In terms of its critical reception and public commentary on it, the show has another kind of strange visibility. It is within the realm of meme creation where the show is referred to the most. The Internet "meme" is a form of visual entertainment, which can manifest itself in many different formats, such as a still image or animated GIF, or even a video (Borzsei, 2013). Memes are often multimodal. However, its construction is usually like this: to single images often "additional texts, images and even sound or animation [are] added to enhance the meme's contagious qualities" (ibid).



Meme on dating culture in India.

The meme can be a phrase, a standalone image, or an image accompanied by text or or a change in the expected style of text (ibid). A meme is versatile in nature, exposing some truth about a particular thing that can be captured and applied in new situations (Zittrain, 2014). The most important quality of the meme is its *transferability*, as it can be changed, copied, and circulated according to what the creator wants. Even though memes function as jokes, they serve as a mode through which people engage with what's happening around them.[25] In the case of *Indian Matchmaking*, we see instances from the show being translated into a meme to critique and poke fun not only at the show itself, but also at elements of Indian and global dating culture. The memes critique everything:

 the high expectations Indian parents have of their children when it comes their educational achievements, career growth, and finding the right partner,



Meme on Indian relatives and their obsession with marriage.

• the double standards that exist in dating culture, especially where men are given licence to explore their sexuality and women are censored for it, and are subjected to many more expectations.



Meme poking fun at what is expected from a girl in an arranged marriage setup.

• the objectionable nature of the show's version of what arranged marriage means, especially in terms of depicting a woman's willingness to adjust and compromise.



Meme poking fun of the show's idea of arranged marriage.

The most iconic meme from the show is the one I introduced at the beginning of this section—"ultimately my efforts are meaningless if the stars are not aligned." This meme was translated to contexts beyond those of Indian culture. Its going viral was instrumental in embedding the show in popular consciousness.

This meme culture persisted with the arrival of the second season of *Indian Matchmaking* on Netflix. The season arrived while I was going through proofs of this article. The new seasons features a mix of old (participants from Season 1) and new faces. While the show seems to ostensible respond to some critiques, for instance viewers walk through Aparna's journey of self-discovery as she breaks up with Sima (Aparna deemed her and the matchmaker a poor match on the show) and is framed in a more flattering light—it is just the same old, same old. The representational techniques, choosing characters from elite backgrounds, reproducing heteropatriarchy, invisibilizing caste, giving regressive advice on the show, and the meme culture. Halfway through the show, I just gave up, as I was bored and over the formula of the show.

Thus, through layering autoethnography, textual analysis, and showing the reception of the show through critics' eyes and meme culture, I have argued that the tension between the surface content of what the participants say and do and aesthetics of the show is the key to understanding its representational politics and its reception and critique. This tension reinforces problematic gender dynamics within the arranged marriage setup and elides caste dynamics. The tension exists in the way that its mode of address is oriented towards a western audience, as demonstrated by the viral meme culture that the show engendered. Netflix has commissioned a second season of the show. I assume the show will persist with presenting these dynamics embedded within diverse portraits, although I would like to see it address some of the critique levelled at it. In the words of the viral meme generated by the show, "ultimately efforts are meaningless, if the stars are not aligned. The rest is up to destiny."

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Notes

- 1. < https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200806-indian-matchmaking-the-reality-show-that-s-divided-viewers Accessed on 15th Sept, 2021. [return to p. 1]
- 2. < https://scroll.in/global/968735/was-painful-to-watch-vyasar-ganesan-on-how-women-were-talked-about-on-indian-matchmaking> Accessed on 15th Sept, 2021.
- $3. < \underline{https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/08/netflix-indian-matchmaking-and-the-shadow-of-caste/614863/> Accessed on 15th Sept, 2021.$
- 4. < https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200806-indian-matchmaking-the-reality-show-that-s-divided-viewers Accessed on 15th Sept, 2021.
- 5. ibid.
- $6. < \underline{https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53499195} > Accessed on 15th Sept, 2021.$
- 7. Sindhis in India are a socio-ethnic group of people originating from Sindh, a province of modern-day Pakistan. After the 1947 partitioning of British India into India and Pakistan, most Sindhi Hindus migrated to India .
- 8. < https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53499195> Accessed on 15th Sept, 2021.
- 9. ibid.
- 10. As Mark Neumann (1996) states, "autoethnography reminds us that forms of cultural representation ... matters deeply in the lives of others who find themselves portrayed in texts not of their own making" (p. 191). Neumann goes on to say, "autoethnography historically originates as a discourse from the margins and identifies the material, political, and transformative dimensions of representational politics. Autoethnography is a form of critique and resistance" (p. 191). Offering a viewpoint of autoethnography from an anthropological perspective, Irma McClaurin (2001) cites autoethnography as an opportunity for correcting misrepresentations and distortions of a culture by an outsider. Cited in Boylorn, 2008.
- 11. Doordarshan (abbreviated as DD) is an Indian public service broadcaster founded by the Government of India in 1959. One of India's most prominent broadcasting organizations in studio and transmitter infrastructure. Doordarshan, which also broadcasts on digital terrestrial transmitters, provides television, radio, online and mobile service throughout metropolitan and regional India and overseas. [return to p. 2]
- 12. Television in India was started in 1959 and was named Doordarshan in 1976. Both Dipankar Sinha (2005) and Abhijit Roy (2008) have pointed to the use of

Doordarshan as an instrument of an activist state used to frame an aesthetics of development communication that involved pedagogy, nationhood, citizenship, sexuality, morality, autonomy and publicness. According to Britta Ohm (1999), "The state's definition of Doordarshan has consisted of its central vision: that the future should bring forth an educated, civilised and united citizenship. Long after the proliferation of the private satellite channels it was still stated that DD's main aim is national integration, inculcating a sense of unity and making people proud that they are Indians." (pp 82)

- 13. The Marwari or Marwadi is an Indian ethnic group that originates from the Rajasthan region of India .
- 14. Bill Nichols (1991), notes that within the stylistic diversity of films categorized as non fiction, documentary is hard to define. He observes that, "documentary as concept or practice occupies no fixed territory. It mobilizes no finite inventory of techniques, addresses no set number of issues, and adopts no completely known taxonomy of forms, styles, or modes." (pp 12). While I recognize the inherent diversity stylistically and thematically in the documentary form, for the purpose of the article, my use of the term documentary aesthetic, in the way the show documents the process of the participants searching a prospective match, and how the camera in the show is given the status of the observer.
- 15. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53499195 Accessed on 15th Sept, 2021.
- 16. In the show, distinctions are made between arranged and love marriages. Arranged marriages are those in which the families participate with or without a matchmaker to find a suitable match for their daughters/sons. Love marriages are those, where the couple chooses to enter into a partnership without getting either the family/matchmaker involved. Arranged marriages are the preferred setup in Indian society as it reinforces and does not disturb the status quo of gender, caste, and class hierarchies.
- 17. Gujju is a synonym of a community hailing from the Gujarat region in India.
- 18. A Hindu temple.
- 19. Meaning "destiny'.
- 20. Rokka (pre-engagement): Roka is one of the most important ceremonies before an Indian wedding. The Roka ceremony marks the union of both the bride and groom's family and friends .
- 21. Dowry is a practice of payment during the time of the marriage ceremony by the bride's family to the groom's family in the form of property or money. Dowry was made illegal in India in 1961, but the practice still persists. It is rarely reported as a crime, for example less than 10,000 cases were reported in 2015 out of 10 million weddings. Moreover, in 2015, more than 113,000 women reported abuse at the hand of their husband or in-laws in matters related to dowry payment. 21 women are killed every day by their husband/in-laws because their families couldn't meet the dowry demand. More at < https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/2/6/14403490/dowry-india-bride-groom-dilemma>, Accessed on Dec 7, 2021.

The word "fair" in India has loaded connotation. It is associate with attributes of being desirable, successful, and attractive. The fairness creams are endorsed by Bollywood superstars such as Shahrukh Khan and Priyanka Chopra. In 2019, the fairness cream market was valued at Rs 3000 crore. For more, < <a href="https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/before-fair-lovely-there-was-afghan-snow-the-before-fair-lovely-there-was-afghan-snow-the-before-fair-lovely-there-was-afghan-snow-the-before-fair-lovely-the-before-fair-lovely-the-before-fair-

 $\label{eq:continuity} $$ \times E2\%81\%A0-all-about-the-fairness-creams-market-in-india/449045/\#:\sim: $$ $$ text=In\%202019\%2C\%20the\%20Indian\%20fairness,by\%202023\%2C\%20the $$ \%20study\%20estimated.> Accessed on Dec 7, 2021 .$

- 22. The great Indian wedding is a phrase that emerged in post globalization of India post the 90s. It refers to a lavish wedding which consists of multiple days of celebration, lavish setups, designer clothes, and elaborate dance sequences.
- 23. Most definitions of Internet memes rely on a concept in evolutionary biology, coined by English evolutionary biologist and author Richard Dawkins. He proposed the term "meme" (based on the Ancient Greek word mīmēma "something imitated') to denote all non-genetic behaviour and cultural ideas that are passed on from person to person, spanning from language to the conventions of football (Davison). The concept became highly debated, and "[s]ince then, like any good meme, it has infected the culture" (Dawkins). The debate mainly concerns what is and what is not a meme, but so far, creating a substantive definition has seemed impossible (Knobel & Lankshear). With the emergence of the Internet, the term "meme" was also applied to content that spread from user to user online. The first "academically rigorous" definition for this particular variation was proposed by Patrick Davison in 2009 in his essay "The Language of Internet Memes": An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission . (cited in Borzsei, ???? complete this) [return to p. 3]
- 24. Social media response becomes one of the more prominent ways to gauge a show's success on a streaming platform. This is because streaming platforms are notoriously vague when it comes to revealing viewership numbers.
- 25. Borzsei (2013) argues that the Internet offers visibility and unprecedented speed for the migration and evolution of memes. Images also transcend cultures more easily than language, and even if there is text in the image, it is most likely to be in English. The generativity of Internet memes allows instant reaction and encourages virality, so people can comment on the most current issues, events and people, as well as find an audience.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Drama serial *Meray Pass Tum Ho* (MPTH) (I Have You, 2019) defines the basics of marital relationship.



Khalil ur Rehman Qamar's infamous interview with Entertainment Pakistan.



Qamar in media debates around woman's rights argues with activist Marvi Sarmad (Aaj TV).

A woman for two pennies: the portrayal of women and changing social constructs of gender in Pakistani TV drama

by Iram Qureshi

Pakistani television has mostly promoted a sacred traditional image of women since 1964. Although with changing global perspectives, TV's female characters have been given modern dress and bold personalities, portrayals with fierce determination and total independence are scarce. I explore the portrayal of women in a Pakistani TV drama serial Meray Pass Tum Ho (MPTH) (I Have You, 2019) to investigate how the screenwriter, Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, exploits gender as a social construct. MPTH presents an antithetical woman character who goes out of the bounds of society to fulfill her materialistic wishes; she gains freedom and gets involved in an extra-marital affair, hence requiring that in the script she be punished. This show became one of the few Pakistani serials that developed a story about an open live-in relationship between a man and woman out of wedlock. Using a narrative analysis, I argue that the writer conveniently conveys common, biased patriarchal opinions about gender roles, knitted up here in romance and love relationships, and I raise questions about how female characters are and might be reconstructed against male characters on Pakistani television, according to changing social norms within the country.

Gender on Pakistani television

In 1949 Simon de Beauvoir put forth the theory of gender roles being a socially constructed phenomenon when she stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Translated by Parshley, 1997). [open references in new window] The proposition of someone becoming a woman depends on the fact that society associates certain traits and roles with specific sex and gender. Feminism's challenge to traditional cultural ideologies around gender have now affected many historically patriarchal societies in western as well as eastern countries by bringing more social freedoms to and acquisition of rights for women. A visual reminder of this cultural change can be seen in many countries' television industries.

In Pakistan, the contemporary television industry is in a competition with Indian television and is providing more modern and fashionable content for its audience than before. But in Pakistan, some elements hinder the television industry's progressiveness or modernized content. The country still has conventional censorship policies, and the industry often bends to the orthodox beliefs of a few, in-demand, famous writers. In this regard, Virgine Dutoya (2018:71) notes that while modern Pakistani dramas explicitly address women's issues and "champion"



Qamar's tragic romantic drama serial *Pyare Afzal* displays the same ending as MPTH.



Qamar's biographic drama serial *Sadqay Tumhare*



Qamar's serial *Mohabbat Tumse Nafrat Hai* is another tragedy with a love and betrayal story.



Poster for *MPTH* claims to be about an imposter wife, a victimized husband and a charming seducer.

women's rights," these dramas "also propose specific representation of 'good' and 'bad' womanhood." A good example of this, then, is the drama I am analyzing here: ARY Digital's 2019 serial *Meray Pass Tum Ho (MPTH)* directed by Nadeem Baig and produced by Humayun Saeed. This series vividly portrays misogynistic ideas while seemingly portraying an ideal woman; it secured a high viewership with favorable social media trends and memes. Its success followed other trends in the regime in Pakistan at that time, which was favored and supported by the younger generation then. Both the government and other religious/cultural institutions played a great role in dispersing conservative politico-religious views about women through direct statements and social media campaigns. The government aimed to gain the sympathies of the public as the champions of religious ideology.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

In this case study of *Meray Pass Tum Ho* (MPTH) (2019-2020), I am particularly interested in how the changing social constructs of gender are depicted in the serial. I want to explore what is socially understood as masculine and feminine while looking at how the gender inequalities in Pakistani society are portrayed through television dramas. I focus primarily on narrative and script, and also consider social media and reviews to see how the drama was received by critics and the public. My focus is on the social construction of gender and patriarchy and how TV drama consumes and reflects these concepts through its fictional text. The serial appeals to viewers' internalized sexist views by manipulating the female characters. And it also has a subtext, which I shall explore later, that subtly promotes patriarchal beliefs vs. its female characters. In addition, the use of glamor and romance, common to TV serials, are also occasion for unspoken, biased gender assumptions.

On a personal level, I was led to write about this drama after encountering a bythen infamous interview with the TV and film writer, director, and producer Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar (KRQ), a die-hard supporter of the then Prime Minister. It appeared on an online YouTube channel Entertainment Pakistan (EPK) in 2019 and it dealt with *MPTH*. In this case, the interview itself revealed the need to evaluate the role of the creative industries in propagating orthodox fundamentalist approaches, especially around gender, through the medium of entertainment. Qamar is a very successful figure in the media industry. He is famous for writing strong dialogue and tragic love stories in his several successful television serials and feature films. [2] The interview of Qamar to EPK then became infamous as it was strongly condemned by many, and a debate on social media arose around his extremely prejudiced remarks about women.

Qamar is an active participant in media debates around women's rights and equality; he openly expresses his views claiming he is a feminist. Contrary to his image of himself and commenting on his interview with Entertainment Pakistan (2019), *The Dawn Images* wrote,

"The self-proclaimed biggest feminist of Pakistan is anything but. His latest interview is a masterclass in mansplaining" (Images Editorial, 2019).

In the interview, Qamar had challenged women that if they want equality, they need to prove that they can do the same things as men do, such as 'kidnapping,' 'gang-raping a man' and 'robbing a bus' (Entertainment Pakistan, 2019). Qamar is a controversial personality and his misogynistic remarks on different occasions



Host Sana Yasir on a show (at ARY Digital) with MPTH director Nadeem Baig, producer Humayun Saeed and cast.



Writer Khalil ur Rehman Qamar explains in a show (at ARY Digital) how he wrote the script of MPTH.



In ARY Digital's show, *MPTH* writer Qamar claims he does not allow the producer to have his/her point of view in his script (Left - Producer Humayun Saeed and Right - Director Nadeem Baig).

have been condemned widely in the media. For example, he is against the Women's March that takes place in Pakistan on the International Women's Day, the 8th of March, every year for the past few years, and he bluntly opposes a very famous slogan, *My Body, My Choice*, used by women during this march.

Qamar's serials such as *Pyare Afzal* 2013 (trans: Dear Afzal), *Sadqay Tumhare* 2014 (trans: May my years be added to yours) and *Mohabbat Tum Say Nafrat Hai* 2017 (trans: Love, I Hate You) are based on conventions of melodrama with romantic plots; they often have tragic endings with at least one of his protagonists dying while being in a love relationship. *Sadqay Tumhare* was a biographical drama based on Qamar's life story where his ex-fiancé passed away long after they could not marry each other. This incident seems to have been replicated in a way in *MPTH* and his other serials.

MPTH became famous for its plot around an imposter wife, a victimized husband, and a charming seducer. It is a 23-part TV serial, which aired on ARY Digital, one of the biggest satellite TV channel networks in Pakistan. The serial was accessible all over the world due to being simultaneously streamed on ARY's YouTube channel. ARY Digital is also one of the earliest satellite TV channel networks in Pakistan and has earned a wide viewership in and outside of the country. ARY Digital claimed in an Instagram post that this one serial achieved "Highest Ever Ratings of Any TV Program of Pakistan" with 37.1 TRPs (arydigital.tv, 2020).

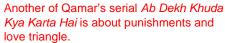
The views reflected in the serial are not necessarily the director or producer's perspective. In this case, the writer Qamar claims that he does not allow the producer to have his/her point of view represented in his written scripts. In fact, the director Nadeem Baig and cast members agreed in the introductory show on TV that the script was not changed, and the scenes were recorded as they were written originally by the writer (ARY Digital, 2020). I have wondered then why Humayun Saeed agreed to produce and act as the protagonist here. One reason that he gives in one of his video interviews is the centrality, uniqueness and importance of the character, Danish, whom he plays as being a male victim of infidelity (Desi TV, 2020). Of course, since TV productions are industrial practice, we can also think of the director and producer's "free" decision to be involved in the production of the serial indicates their conditions of employment and thus their concurrence with the script.

In terms of background to *MPTH*, Pakistani television dramas used gender and sex issues as plot elements previously, but these were not very explicit in their expression and nor highlighted the major differences and judgments that the society holds for different genders in similar situations. And only in the past two to three decades has the media been given more liberty to raise gender and sex issues in a patent manner. What I refer to as "drama" is also referred to as "soap opera" in the United States, but it has a different role and structure in Pakistani TV. Drama is usually referred in Pakistan as Urdu language serials with one story spread over 13 to 32 or more episodes broadcast in one to two-quarters of the years. Previously, up to the 1990s, when there was only one TV channel PTV (Pakistan Television), the drama used to broadcast in primetime, between 8 and 9 pm when all the family members used to watch TV together. These dramas were used to enforce cultural beliefs, narratives and ideologies, encouraging and perpetuating traditional norms and values of the society.

Since 1964, Pakistani television has presented female characters with all the curtailments of culture and traditions, promoting them as forgiving and submissive. However, we can see a clear change in the female characters in recent years. Some television serials have presented controversial issues related to women, such as extramarital affairs, rape, prostitution, and the enhanced sexual desire of women, but the scripts had to be written in a very discreet manner to

avoid becoming a target of religious criticism and state censorship policies.







Drama serial *Makaan* depicts extra-marital relations between a woman and her brother in law.

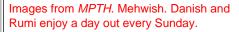
Some of the examples are from my own experience of TV serials and TV films including Geo TV's drama serial *Makaan* (aka Home) (d.Qureshi, 2004) which showed an extramarital affair between a woman (Bushra Ansari) and her younger brother-in-law (Shabbir Jan) living in the same house. Another serial *Ishq ke Inteha* (aka Unbounded Love) (d.Qureshi, 2009) telecast on Geo TV, highlighted the issue of rapes and prostitution businesses run by the powerful politicians exploiting naive and needy women under the pretense of operating beauty salons business. Hum TV's serial *Sangat* (d. Kashif Nisar, 2015) and Geo TV's serial *Ab Dekh Khuda kya* Karta Hai (d. Ali Raza Usama, 2018) raised sexual harassment and assault issues. The TV films such as *Abida Gunahgar Hogai* (aka Dowry List) (d.Qureshi, 2007) displayed how the girls are compelled to earn by dancing in men-only parties for their dowries and to run their homes.

MPTH, though, is one of the pioneering television serials of Pakistan that openly displays a live-in relationship between a heterosexual couple out of wedlock. "Living together" is not considered progressive in the national cultural context. It is taboo and unacceptable in Pakistani society for a man or a woman to have premarital sex due to cultural and religious reasons, also it is forbidden for a man or woman to have an extra-marital physical relationship, which has consequences as adultery. In common custom, woman is taught that if a man is involved in an extra-marital affair or pre-marital sex, the wife or wife-to-be is supposed to forgive him: the errors are made by humans, and he is after all a man. However, if a woman makes such a mistake, it is rarely forgivable by society: a woman is supposed to be the keeper of a man and a family's honor. I will briefly explain the story of the drama serial before tracing out these issues any further.



Abida Gunahgar Hogai displayed a woman dancing in parties to earn for her dowry







Danish works for a nominal salary in a government department.



The richer Anushey visits Mehwish and asks why Rumi doesn't go to school at the age of six.

MPTH develops incidents in the life of a rebellious woman character who defines social convention to gain a kind of freedom. The unfaithful wife, Mehwish (played by Ayeza Khan) has a 6-year-old son Rumi (played by Shees Sajjad Gul) and a dotting and loyal but possessive husband Danish Akhter (played by Humayun Saeed), who in contrast to her wants nothing more in his life than his wife. Danish, a middle-class government officer, has an apartment he inherited from his father but earns a nominal salary in which he can hardly afford a family. Mehwish is always unsatisfied with their financial situation and unsuccessfully tries to persuade Danish to take bribes. Her dissatisfaction increases because of her friendship with a young woman Anushey (played by Mehar Bano) from a rich family, who often asks Mehwish to accompany her on lavish shopping trips and spends money extravagantly on fashion wardrobe and jewelry.



Anushey buys expensive jewelry from a jewelry store for her brother's wedding



Mehwish borrows money from Anushey to buy a gold jewelry set that she has been longing to buy for a while.



Anushey introduces Shehwar to Mehwish in a restaurant during a shopping trip, and Shehwar praises Mehwish's beauty

Danish and Mehwish's relationship gets worse with the arrival of Shehwar Ahmed (played by Adnan Siddiqui) in their lives. He is a business tycoon who finally wins an interpersonal competition with Danish by having Mehwish for himself. Significantly, Shehwar enjoys a physical relationship with Mehwish for months before agreeing to marry her. A non-marital sexual relationship is a major sin in Islam, which is the governing religion of Pakistan. However, this concept has more cultural value than religious, and people from other religions in the region including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Parsis equally oppose the idea of extramarital or non-marital sexual relations. Shehwar's wife Maham (played by Sawera Nadeem) breaks Mehwish's dream-existence by evicting her from the house she occupies with Shehwar just before Mehwish's wedding with Shehwar is to take place. Maham reports Shehwar to authorities for fraud, forgery, and money

laundering, who arrest and send him to prison that same day. All at once, Mehwish becomes homeless and must try to regain her position as wife in the heart and home of Danish, who has now become a millionaire after getting into the stock exchange business. Hania (played by Hira Mani) is Rumi's school teacher and the daughter of Danish's work colleague, Mateen (played by Mohammed Ahmed). She tries her best to help both Danish and Rumi in overcoming the grief after Mehwish leaves them both. Hania falls in love with Danish. Maham forgives Shehwar, but Mehwish fails to win Danish back, who dies in a cardiac arrest leaving both Mehwish and Hania grieving forever.





Anushey tells Mehwish that Shehwar's wife is suspicious of him.

Shehwar and Danish are introduced first time at the henna ceremony for Anushey's brother.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Danish remains awake at night feeling guilty that he cannot even afford to buy a piece of jewelry for his wife.



Danish gets suspicious of Shehwar when notices how he looks at Mehwish.



Danish expresses his displeasure about the way Shehwar acts.

The social construction of gender

There are various theoretical explanations for the hold that the social construction of gender has over human society. For example, in psychological terms, Judith Lorber (1994:2) notes that

"[i]n the feminist psychoanalytical perspective, gender is embedded in the unconscious and is manifest in sexuality, fantasies, language, and the incest taboo." [open references in new window]

She stresses that in this way sexuality becomes "a powerful cultural and ideological force that oppresses women." Nargis Rizvi, Kausar Khan and Babar Shaikh (2014), on the other hand, argue that the society has

"constructed a 'Model' for women that consider them 'Objects' [...]. The model determines women's traits and responsibilities and establishes parameters for what is legitimate for women, and these have implications for their personality, lifestyle and health."

To explain the way how things are socially constructed, Sally Haslanger considers a simplified account of the construction of race or gender as an example and notes:

"[T]o be a member of the subordinate group in question is to be viewed and treated in a certain way by the dominant group (and usually others). Members of the subordinate group typically internalize and eventually come to resemble and even reinforce the dominant's image because of the coercive power behind it. Thus the dominant's view appears to be confirmed, when in fact they simply have the power to enforce it." (Haslanger, 2012: 6)

Hence the social construction depends on various factors including how the dominant group views the subordinate; economic and political divisions; class or social status; group classifications; and how the groups view themselves (Haslanger, 2012:6). The dominant group then legislates basic beliefs to define a subordinate gender and how that group must present themselves in society and what rules they follow.

The socially constructed model that Nargis et. al. mention is not limited to women, it has implications for men as well. By giving them a certain status, it places responsibilities on them; however, it gives them some privileges and control over women at the same time. This imbalance automatically ascribes that men can make decisions on women's behalf; men are the wise ones or in-charge, while women are deemed weaker and less intelligent. When this model of gender construction is applied to *MPTH*, it reveals some telling details of the series' narrative construction. For example, the protagonist Danish (Mehwish's husband) feels the pressure as the sole earner when cannot fulfill Mehwish's small wishes; he earns a small salary but not enough to even buy her a piece of jewelry or send his son to a good school. At the same time, as a man and head of the family, Danish belongs to the so-called dominant group. Thus he also feels the responsibility of protecting Mehwish from 'bad guys' like Shehwar Ahmed and Monty (Danish's neighbor, played by Musaddiq Malik); in turn, his thinking that his wife is weak, vulnerable and unable to protect herself in a sense puts Mehwish



Monty teases Danish for his broken down motor bike and offers to sell him his car in exchange for Danish's beautiful wife.

off. She apparently does not want Danish to treat her like a little girl and tell her what is good or bad for her. She wants to break free of subordination and to gain autonomy and she wants Danish to listen to her instead.

With the construction of gender roles comes a division of responsibilities, and most societies expect children to be socialized into the same pattern. Caroline Moser (1993: 15-16) notes that

"within the household, there is a clear division of labor based on gender. The man of the family, as the 'breadwinner', is primarily involved in productive work outside the home, while the woman as the housewife and 'homemaker' takes overall responsibility for the reproductive and domestic work involved in the organization of the household."





Danish goes to work as the sole breadwinner of the family.

In a traditional marriage, Mehwish looks after the child and does household chores.

In this context, a professional job outside the home or running a business to earn money are often considered productive labor that is masculine or a man's work, while the house chores and caring for the family members and rearing children are considered feminine and reproductive works. This, of course, is also a class fantasy, since poor women have long had to work in fields and as maids to provide sustenance for themselves and their family. *MPTH*'s narrative line follows these assumptions: Danish is the sole earner of the family, hence his role is productive while Mehwish's role is reproductive because she is a stay-at-home wife and takes care of domestic responsibilities. These clearly defined roles and division of labor are often assumed as "natural" in Pakistani dramas, so that the plots participate in strengthening this gender-based ideology by promoting and inculcating gender stereotypes. In this regard, some of the most recent drama serials as *Ranjha Ranjha Kardi* (2018, dir. Kashif Nisar) *Pehli Si Muhabbat* (2021, dir. Anjum Shehzad) and *Laapata* (2021, dir. Khizer Idrees) incorporate similar versions of gender roles through the development of their lead characters.

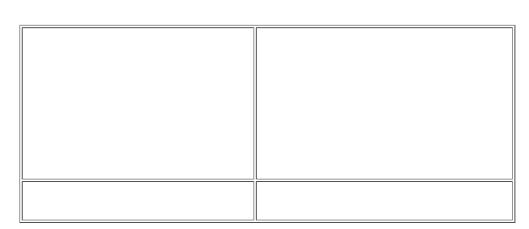


Drama serial *Pehli Si Mohabbat* is based on stereotypical gender roles.



Drama serial *Ranjah Ranjah Kardi* is about a dutiful wife to her mentally ill husband.

<u> </u>	



A significant part of Pakistani society still applies the masculine/feminine attribution to productive and reproductive roles for most of the chores and the division of responsibilities in 21st century. In particular, as Iftikhar Ahmed (2018) writes,

"though women constitute 49% of [Pakistan's] population, they constitute only 24% of the labor force." $\,$

One of the main reasons for this imbalance is that in dominant cultural ideologies women are expected to stay home, while the men of the family often deem it unsafe for the women to work outside their homes.



Danish asks Mehwish to put Rumi into a cheaper school instead of going to work.



When Mehwish insists on getting a job, Danish tells her to apply for a Public Relations Officer job because she does not have experience and many companies only hire beautiful faces.



Danish refuses to speak to Shehwar to get Mehwish a job, stating Shehwar would take him as a broker (pimp).

In MPTH, Danish restricts Mehwish to being a housewife instead of working to contribute financially to make their life better. He considers it perilous for her to go out and work due to her physical beauty and his fear of other men's intentions toward her. Mehwish is shown to have a degree but must stay home even when the family most needs her to work. When Mehwish seeks permission from her husband to get a job, he sarcastically replies that she can get a job in no time if she sends her picture with a CV because bosses need beautiful faces for dealing with the customers, but she might not get good salary due to no experience. His words hurt her and show that he does not trust her abilities. Despite being an educated man, he believes in the conventional ideas of his class that view it appropriate for women to only do housework and raise children. When she asks about possibly working at Shehwar's office and if Danish would speak to him about it, Danish refuses stating, "If I talk to him, it will feel like I am doing brokerage [pimping in other words]," which shocks Mehwish. She tries to formulate arguments to counter his fears, but Danish is not convinced and asks her to get Rumi admitted to a cheaper school that he can afford on his salary so she would not have to work. In fact, Danish's inner insecurity with Mehwish's beauty compels him to become a typical conservative man but in a romantic and affable manner.

In my personal experience, some of the middle class in Pakistan is moderate in its beliefs and does not confine women to the home. However, most of society, even many who send their daughters to universities for higher education, believes that the reason women might need a good education is only to enhance their role as good mothers and understanding wives; most families do not educate their daughters for a job. I believe that this division of labor and assigned gender roles make people less capable of being independent and able to survive on their own. For example, in this TV series Danish does not know how to do household chores. If Mehwish cannot cook, he buys food from takeaways; if she gets late in returning home from shopping, he waits for her to come back and cook for him. He can hardly make an omelet to feed his son if needed. Although he has to survive after Mehwish leaves him and their son Rumi after divorce, he cannot manage the child and housework with his job so he has to put the child in boarding school.



Danish makes an omlette for Rumi when Mehwish is late from work.



Danish goes to see Rumi in boarding school when the principal calls him to say Rumi is bad at studies.

Patriarchal opinions

Leisbet van Zoonen (1994:41) discusses the important role media play in gender discourse: the media are "(social) technologies," which are

"accommodating, modifying, reconstructing and producing disciplining and contradictory cultural outlooks of sexual difference."

There is a relation between gender and communication [its portrayal through media] that is a "negotiation over meanings and values that inform whole ways of life" (Zoonen, 1994:41). MPTH presents gender roles as based in the patriarchal system, which I will discuss further in relation to Pakistan.

Khawar Mumtaz, Yameema Mitha and Bilquis Tahira (2003:46) argue that "[i]t is the patriarchal system of society in Pakistan which determines attitudes towards

women." Oxford dictionary (2021) refers to patriarchy as "any form of social organization in which men have predominant power" (Oxford Reference, 2021). Looking at this in more detail, Najma Khan (2020: 8) defines patriarchy as "a systematic subjugation of women through the institutionalization of restrictive norms and practices through legal, religious, social, and cultural sanctions."



There are several examples of Pakistani dramas that are based on male dominance including *Humsafar* (Companion) (2011, dir. Sarmad Sultan Khoosat), *Alif Allah Aur Insaan* ("A" Allah and Human) (2017, dir. Ahson Talish),



MPTH: Danish tells Mehwish to not wear the black sari to the wedding ceremony because the blouse is too short and reveals her body.



Danish dances with Anushey intimately as he puts his hands on her bare back.



Mehwish dances hesitantly with Shehwar when he insists.

and Main Maa Nahi Banna Chahti (I don't want to be a mother) (2017, dir. Furgan Adam). MPTH reinforces patriarchal patterns in different ways, which display the dominance of men in different classes over women. Through Danish and Mehwish's storyline, the writer reinforces the idea of a controlling relationship. The husband tries to justify his dominance by connecting it to love and possessiveness. His lines in the dialogue convey patriarchal opinions. For example, he comments on how the woman has a responsibility to restrict herself and behave conservatively, but the man does not. In addition, Danish instructs Mehwish on whom she should meet and whom to avoid. He tells her how much he loves her and that's why he does not feel comfortable with other men looking at her with admiration, but he does not ask how she feels. He claims that Shehwar and Monty look at her with lust which disturbs him and ignites anger in him. He decides whether or not Mehwish can wear a certain dress at an event and wants his will to be respected, not her wishes. Other TV serials show male characters expressing similar thoughts, such as in Zindagi Gulzar Hai (Life is a blossomed garden) (2012, dir. Sultana Siddiqui) where protagonist Zaroon and his father object to the sister's dressing and way of life; they would dictate what she should wear and how she should behave.

Sonal Vij (2021) argues, "Standards are different for men and women" and that to men of the family, "[t]oo much freedom seems unsuitable for women." MPTH's story shows that the standards are immensely different for men and women. For example, at a party Danish dances with Anushey intimately but does not like Mehwish dancing with Shehwar. He leaves the venue in dismay and anger, taking Mehwish and Rumi and leaving everyone surprised. At home, he criticizes Mehwish and gets angry that she danced with Shehwar, but when Mehwish replies that he was dancing with his hands on Anushey's back, he states that Anushey is like his sister. He also hugs Ayesha in Salman's office in front of her husband; it is a common gesture of greetings in the upper class and he does not find it wrong. It shows a clear contradiction in the standards set by the middleclass Danish for himself and his wife. In contrast, the rich man Salman has no issues with his wife Ayesha hugging or shaking hands with other men. Anushey dances with other men at her brother's Henna ceremony but her family has no issues with that because of their class. However, the plot development of the serial focuses on Danish and Mehwish's storyline since, as the representatives of the middle class, they represent the majority of Pakistan's urban culture.



Danish gets jealous when watching Mehwish dancing with Shehwar.



Danish stops Mehwish dancing and abruptly leaves the party with her and Rumi.

In Fouzia Saeed's (2006:159) view, the gender system in Pakistan still is based on patriarchal patterns:

"Regardless of the brave struggle of the women's movement in Pakistan, the overall system continues to give men the social responsibility for judging women's morality. Thus, men determine a

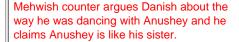


Danish warns Mehwish after she dances with Shehwar at the party.

woman's fate by categorising her as being a moral and chaste person or as having a bad character." (2006:159)

In television dramas, the scriptwriter presents his perspective of what constitutes a 'good woman' or a 'bad woman' and what a woman must be, not only through the dialogue spoken by male characters in the serial but also by having these values endorsed by the female characters. Hania's (Rumi's teacher) dialogue to her sister about Mehwish, '*Jis aurat mein haya nahi hoti wo khubsoorat nahi hoti* (a woman who is not modest, is not beautiful) is the same that writer expressed in his interview to Entertainment Pakistan (EPK, 2019), adding that he calls those women who lack modesty and loyalty, 'non-women.' Hence through creating two opposite characters, Mehwish and Hania, the writer enforces the concept of a good vs. a bad woman, detailing the expectations of society from its women.







Danish challenges Mehwish, asking how can she be a good woman when she cannot say no to offers of a dance or a lift from other men.

There is an contradiction in the script itself around the concept of a good woman. The criteria of 'haya' or 'modesty' is expressed differently for different classes and for opposite genders. When Mehwish reluctantly accepts the offer of their neighbor Monty to drop her and Rumi off at the nearby market since he insists, not knowing Monty's intentions and habits, Danish gets enraged. He questions his wife's character:

"Kabhi murawat mein 'haan' keh deti ho, aur kabhi zid par maan jati ho. Batao aik achi larki honay ki kya daleel hay tumharay pass? ("Sometimes you say 'yes' out of courtesy [pointing towards her dance with Shehwar], and sometimes you agree when someone insists [meaning Monty's giving them a lift]. Tell me what is your logic about being a pious [good] girl?")

Danish tells Mehwish that she lacks an inner instinct through which a woman can recognize a lusty gaze by a man and that she is not bothered with how Shehwar looks at her. The dialogue insinuates that Mehwish purposely ignores that instinct and becomes prey to Shehwar's lust because of her materialistic nature and because of Danish's overt possessiveness. Interestingly, no character says that men need to lower their gaze and give respect to women, although this is often mentioned in Islamic religious congregations in Pakistan.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Monty gets married to a beautiful woman and become a good man.



Maham forgives Shehwar for his infidelity.

By no means I am trying to justify that a woman should overlook any bad glances or remarks to her, lose her dignity, cheat on her life partner, or let anyone exploit her like Shehwar does. Rather, in its narrative construction and dialogue, the serial portrays sexual differences in favor of one gender over the other; it gives a clear message to women to be ready to face severe punishments for their deeds at the same time that it gives men a levy to enjoy liberty and get little or no punishment at the end. In this regard, in the serial Monty gets married to a beautiful educated woman and becomes a pious man after all the flirting he used to do with other men's wives. And Shehwar is finally let off for his wrongdoings by his wife Maham. That's the narrative resolution! Both homewreckers succeed in getting peace but Mehwish has to suffer rest of her life for her sin.

Najma Khan (2020, p.ii) astutely argues in her study of Pakistani [Urdu] drama serials that

"the majority of Urdu dramas are heavily invested in a 'heteronormative visual culture' that strongly adheres to the patriarchal norms and traditions of Pakistani society, which reinstates and sustains, rather than disrupts, the status-quo between the binary genders." [open references in new window]

MPTH endorses Khan's argument in many ways. In several incidents, characters say that women should have more patience and should forgive men's betrayal but not vice versa. For example, when Mehwish asks Hania why men who make the same mistake are easily forgiven but not women, Hania replies,

"Kyun k mard apni kokh say bachay paeda nahi krtay, aurat apni kokh say bachay paeda krti hay, naslon ki shanakht us k rehm-o-karam pay hoti hay" (Because a man does not give birth but a woman does from her womb, lineage identification is at her mercy).







Hania tells Mehwish why women should forgive men's unfaithful behaviour.

This concept may be unfamiliar to Western readers. A woman bears children but because lineage runs in the families through the father (in Pakistani society), she cannot give lineage to her children. It is considered her responsibility to uphold the lineage that her children get through their father's name by her being forgiving and tolerant.

Maham is not ready to give her husband away to Mehwish even after knowing that he was living with Mehwish for the past six month, cheating on her and about to marry Mehwish behind her back. Although Maham tries to punish Shehwar in her own way, making him remember where he came from before she gave him



Maham stops Shehwar from leaving.



Drama serial *Dil-e-Muztar* is the story of a woman forgiving her husband after all the difficulties he put her into.

upper-class status, very soon she pardons him. When she tries to stop Shehwar as he decides to leave home, she says,

"Aisi hi hoti hain hum, hamara Shehwar Ahmed tum jaisa bewafa ya pathar dil hi kyun na ho, usay rakh leti hain. Kisi ko nahi detein." (Such are us, women, even if our Shehwar Ahmed [husband] is unfaithful like you or stone-hearted, we keep him. We do not give him to anyone).

Many other drama serials incorporate this philosophy of forgiving men's unfaithfulness. These include *Humsafar* (Companion) (2011, dir. Sarmad Sultan Khoosat); a very famous serial, *Dil-e-Muztar* (The Anxious Heart) (2013, dir. Shahzad Kashmiri); *Mere Bewafa* (tarns: My Unfaithful) (2018, dir. Sakina Samo); *Khasara* (Loss) (2018, dir. Shahid Shafaat); *Anaa* (Ego) (2019, dir. Shahzad Kashmiri); and *Sabaat* (Stability) (2020, dir. Shahzad Kashmiri), to name a few.



Drama serial *Mere Bewafa* is the story of a submissive wife who forgives her unfaithful husband.



Drama serial *Khasar* depicts an unfaithful wife who met a worst ending.

Qamar even repeats a similar dialogue in two different places. In episode 8 Mehwish says to Danish:

"Meri mama kehti thein agar aik aurat mard pay shak kare to hansi aati hai, magar aik mard aurat par shak kare to rona ata hay." (My mother used to say that if a woman suspects her husband [of cheating], one finds it funny, but if a husband suspects his wife [of cheating], one feels like crying.)

In episode 15 Hania says the same words to Wateera (her sister). She says that their father (Mateen who himself cheated on his wife in the serial) wrote in his diary,

"Agar aurat mard pay shak kare to mujhe hansi aati hai, magar mard aurat pay shak karay to mujhey rona ata hay." (If a woman suspects her husband [of cheating], I feel like laughing, but if a husband suspects his wife [of cheating], I feel like crying.)

At another place in episode 15 she also quotes from her father's diary:

"Us mard ke muskurane par taras khao, jise apni biwi par shak ho gaya ho." (Sympathize with a smiling man who has doubts about his wife [of cheating on him])

These lines repeatedly emphasize that a man needs sympathy for having doubts about his wife cheating or it is a serious matter if a man suspects his wife, but it is



Hania quotes her father's words about women and men's suspicions when talking to Wateera about Mehwish.



Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar defends his version view of good and bad woman in the serial MPTH.



Shehwar disregards Mehwish's marriage requests lovingly.



Maham gets Shehwar released from prison so she can live with him again.



Danish refuses to accept Mehwish back in his life and suffers a heart attack at her house.

not worth paying attention if a woman has concerns of her man's infidelity. Even so, there is agreement that men are usually unfaithful, and women are not. We can see why Qamar, the writer, has put more emphasis on how a woman is expected to behave, while men can be playful or unfaithful to her; she is expected to overlook his flaws, stay calm and patient, even if the husband accuses her of being immoral. The contradiction I find interesting in this kind of narrative is that the writer fails to provide a counter argument as to why a man must pass judgment and be unforgiving. Or to challenge what constitutes a 'good man' as this narrative challenges what constitutes a good woman.

Secondly, *MPTH* foregrounds the authority of men by tracing the connections between gender and money. The character development indicates that the choice is in a man's hand to give a woman the status she wants or deserves in (his) life. It is an ideological commonplace in patriarchal societies that the women who have more financial resources and are tenacious, sometimes career oriented, are easily characterized as home wreckers, stubborn and bad influences on other women. For example, in the serial Shehwar takes advantage of beautiful women from financially weaker backgrounds because of his experience with a rich headstrong wife, Maham. He wants to have more control over his lovers. He keeps Mehwish as a mistress and repeatedly forestalls her requests to marry, asking if he is not loving her enough and saying that she would not remain a lover anymore if she became a wife. He shows his power by refusing to give her the status of a wife. And in Pakistan, marriage gives a woman important status not only for cultural, religious, and legal reasons but also for personal security, financial support, and community respect.

Over and over, *MPTH* makes a stark statement about how a woman's life is incomplete and insecure without a man, no matter which social and economic class she belongs to. For example, when Maham gets Shehwar released from prison and brings him back home, he asks if she suddenly felt mercy for him or if her action was out of love. Maham replies,

"Meri mama kehti thein aurat aur mard ko joron mein banaya hay us [God] nay. Kisi aik say toot jao to dosray say jurna parta hay. Tou main nay socha tum say toot kar bhi kisi aur mard say jurna hay to tum buray ho? (My mother used to say that God has created men and women in pairs. If you break up with one you have to pair up with someone else. Hence, I thought if I have to pair up with someone anyways, why not you?)

This speech emphasizes the conviction that a woman has to be with a man in her life so instead of breaking up with one and marrying to another, it is easier to forgive his mistakes and remain with the same person. At this point the writer again asserts that women are supposed to be more adaptive, even if they are from rich families and have the easy economic option to part ways. With fewer resources, Mehwish also tries to go back to her husband Danish, instead of starting her own life separate from him. Though she is already divorced and knows that she cannot remarry Danish she still wants to live in his house thinking that she needs a man in her life and Danish, her first love, would be best for it and might accept her back, but that never happens.



When Mehwish is leaving, Danish says to Shehwar that she is only worth two pennies and Shehwar was offering him 50 million.



Danish's 'two penny' comment leaves Mehwish in shock and was condemned by many women viewers.



Shehwar seduces Mehwish during job hours and then lies to her about an official visit to Islamabad.



Ayesha works confidently with her husband Salman in his office.

The serial incorporates a very old prejudice against divorce, showing a woman as tawdry for separating from her husband. In fact, as a result of the serial, some women took Danish's famous dialogue (below) as an extreme attack on the integrity of a woman and even a petition was filed in a civil court of Pakistan against the airing of the serial, alleging that the serial showed women in a bad light (Khaleej Times, 2020). When Mehwish gets divorced from Danish and is leaving with Shehwar, Danish reminds Shehwar of his offer of 50 million rupees to divorce her that Danish declined and comments.

"Is do takay ki ladki ke liye aap mujhe 50 million day rahay thay." (You were offering me 50 million for this girl who is only worth two pennies?)

This line was widely lauded on social media platforms by men and some fundamentalist women and became a meme for some time; most of the liberal minded women on social media took the specific speech as an insult to women. For example, Sadaf Haider (2019) argues,

"Just like Mehwish, Shahwar also broke his marriage vows and he also tempted Mehwish. In every respect, he was as guilty as her, yet no one calls him a cheap, worthless man."

Taking the woman's point of view, lawyer Sana Saleem argued that

"[t]he show had a huge impact and hurt women. The courts have a duty to correct something that negatively affects society." (Rehman, 2020)

In terms of television drama, Mehwish is not the only women who embarks on working professionally and earning a living to support a family. However, this serial depicts women as not being safe in office jobs, contributing to an image of women being weak, needing protection by good men. Again, referring to common attitudes toward the relation of production/reproduction and gender, I Iqbal and N Pasha Zaidi (2021, 105) note that "one of the main concerns of Pakistani families is the intermingling of men and women in work environments," which this serial emphasizes as an area of concern. The plotline about Shehwar's love affair with Maham leading to his marriage and conflicted relationship, then his involvement with Mehwish and the other lovers before her in his office convey the message that workplaces are not very secure for women. This scenario of seduction, in a way, justifies the patriarchal belief for the women should not work outside the home as they are vulnerable, and men can easily intimidate them. The other main example, Ayesha working confidently with Salman in his office, still supports the view that a woman is only safe with her husband.

Through most of the characters, the serial confirms the idea of a woman taking all the burden off a man's shoulder for any mistakes made. The man does not take responsibility for his actions and what happened. When Maham (Shehwar's wife) accuses Shehwar of breaking Danish and Mehwish's marriage, he blatantly refuses to accept that. In fact, he was the one who kept on nudging Mehwish to leave Danish, by calling repeatedly on her phone, praising her beauty, giving her a job worth more than her qualifications, exploiting her materialistic desires by giving her expensive gifts, psychologically pressuring her to leave Danish because she deserves much more than what Danish can give her. When faced with these things, Shehwar claims that he will never agree to Maham's statement that he broke their marriage; rather he says it was all Mehwish's fault—she was unthankful and dissatisfied with what she had and dreamt of having what she didn't. In the way the male characters are delineated, the script implies that men are to be respected and accepted in the society, no matter if they cheat, lie or go to any limits of hypocrisy.



Shehwar refuses to accept responsibility for breaking up Mehwish and Danish's marriage.

Representation

For cultural critics, one of the key issues that they explore is the relation between fiction and social life, or on a larger scale, the relation between language and lived experience. One of the most important contemporary theorists to take up this kind of study is Stuart Hall (1997:16), who uses the concept of *representation* to trace how cultural life is generated and why it is important. Hall defines representation as "the production of meaning through language," discourse and image. He then explains that

"meaning depends on the relationship between things in the world—people, objects and events, real or fictional—and the conceptual system, which can operate as a mental representation of them" (Hall, 1997:17).

In Hall's theory, there is no true representation but different ways to represent. Hence, it can be argued that the set of concepts attached to a person, discourse or image, plays an important role in shaping the representation. In film and television dramas, viewers are presented with a certain image and understanding of a person, object or event via a representation itself shaped by the media makers' conceptual systems. I am using one TV drama as a case study here to explore how the narrative shapes the representation of the female characters and thus the social meanings assigned to them. In this way, the drama itself enters into the circuit of gender representations within Pakistan today.

MPTH was sold as a pro-male serial, presenting a male victim of love for an unchaste wife. This was presumably happening for the first time in television history. As Haider (2019) writes, "More Pakistani men are watching Meray Pass Tum Ho because it absolves them of moral responsibility," and "it is not surprising because the show flips the usual Pakistani drama plot line by making the man the victim of infidelity." Even the actors themselves agreed with some of the critics who said that aspects of the serial were misogynistic. For example, Adnan Siddiqui, who played Shehwar, posted on his Instagram,

"I understand the dialogue had some problematic leanings, and sometimes went a little far, sometimes quite far in painting women with a single brush stroke—I understand and take all of that on board. I wish the drama had consciously added nuance to the storyline." (Geo, 2020)

MPTH has eight main women characters both middle-class and elite. Some of these are minor characters such as Wateera (Hania's sister), Ifra (Monty's wife) and Rumi's school principal whom I do not study in detail. Some of these characters are stereotypical while others are not. My main concern is how the writer has tried to differentiate between good and bad women.

I discuss the characters with reference to their class, working status, personal attributes and their actions. Here, I use Hall's reflective approach in the representation theory for some characters and intentional approach for others. Hall (1994:24) explains,

"in the reflective approach, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world."

In contrast, in the intentional approach

"it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning

on the world through language." (Hall, 1994:25)

The implication here is that within any (artistic) representation, some aesthetic choices and connotations indicate a strong artistic voice while other aspects of the representation seem to be given from the author's milieu at the time, used unreflectively.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mehwish shows Danish an expensive necklace she wants him to buy for her.



Mehwish answers Sehewar's calls in Danish's absence.

Within *MPTH*, the character of Mehwish, a middle-class woman, is the most controversial one; she is presented as the 'bad woman', egoistic, narcissistic, selfish, self-absorbed, and mindless. The serial explores these traits through Mehwish's actions and personality. She is envious of Anushey's (her friend) riches and jealous of Hania's (Rumi's teacher) presence in Danish's life. Looking at Anushey's crazy spending on non-essential stuff, Mehwish wants the same for herself. She wants to buy a necklace that she saw with Anushey in the market, although it almost costs double the monthly income of her husband. She wants a new dress every time she has to attend an event. I would call these plot developments an "intentional" message by the writer to those husbands and families who cannot afford lavish lives; they should restrict their women and daughters from friendships with women from above their own class.

Mehwish's bad woman persona is fully exposed when she starts responding to Shehwar's calls, goes to work in his office, and gets irritated with Danish and tells him that she wants to leave him for Shehwar. Long after she left him, she tries to call Danish's cell phone in order to meet Rumi, and Hania (Rumi's teacher) answers his phone by mistake (she thought it was her late father's phone). Mehwish thinks Hania is with Danish and expresses her disgust by asking if Hania is Danish's girlfriend. The word 'girlfriend' is used commonly as a derogatory term in Pakistan to refer to a sex partner outside marriage. Mehwish herself is living as a 'girlfriend' with Shehwar but taunts Hania as that; further she insults Hania several other times even when she is sure that Danish does not want to see his ex-wife (Mehwish) anymore. She is literally jealous of Hania until the end of the serial. She does not want her ex-husband Danish to be in a relationship with someone else.



Mehwish tells Danish she is sick of his behaviour and wants to leave him for Shehwar.



Mehwish accuses Hania of being Danish's girlfriend when Hania answers Danish's phone.

Mehwish's self-absorbed nature is made obvious in various incidents. In one incident, six months after leaving Danish and Rumi, she returns to claim that she wants Rumi to spend his weekends with her at Shehwar's house. She does not ask the child how he felt and what he went through after she left him quietly one night or if he wants to spend any time with her at all. Also, she decides to marry Shehwar and live in his house without considering that everything he has is owned by Maham.

Mehwish is shown weak in nature because she has been influenced by her cloistered life in a middle-class patriarchal household. She comes under pressure very quickly and longs for luxury. She is easily manipulated with the lure of materialistic things and praising of her beauty. Shehwar succeeds in establishing a



Rumi cries at night in the boarding school after he refuses to meet his mother in school.



Shehwar gifts an expensive necklace to Mehwish.



Anushey criticises Mehwish for leaving Danish and Rumi.



Maham arrives unannounced just before Mehwish and Shehwar's wedding. She slaps and evicts Mehwish from the home that she owns.

relationship with Mehwish using sweet talk tactics, playing the victim of an unhappy marriage, showing off his wealth, and pretending to offer romance. She listens to Shehwar's phone calls, falls for his ideas about going out of city, and ends up having sex with him. Ayeza Khan, who played the role of Mehwish, wrote on her instagram account, about the distastefulness of the character:

"Mehwish was a character probably no one wanted to do, maybe because of the preconceived notion that a 'heroine' can never be bad. She can't be someone people hate. A heroine will always be innocent, will cry, scream, suffer and be helpless, be forgiving and she will do anything but betray her hero." (Web Desk ARY News, 2020) [open references in new window]

Mehwish openly reveals her money-oriented approach to life. She expects Danish to take bribes to fulfill her wishes of wearing new and expensive clothes, admitting her son to a private school with high fees, complaining to Danish about living in a small flat.

Also depicted as a bad woman is Anushey, a character from the upper class. Anushey is divorced without any solid reason and lives with her daughter in a modern family home which is her parents' house. Although her life is very different from that of Mehwish, they are still good friends. Anushey and her daughter have her parents' full financial and moral support. She is symbolically a 'bad woman' who has an influence on Mehwish. She sets up the relation between Mehwish and Shehwar, but later, trying to become a good woman, she taunts Mehwish for what that woman has done to her husband but never accepts her own fault in the whole matter. She witnesses Mehwish's final encounter with Maham but offers no help or shelter to her even for a single day. Hence, she is a stereotypical character depicting a shallow upper-class woman protected by her status.

Similar to Anushey, Maham (Sawera Nadeem) is also a privileged but more intelligent and independent woman from the upper class. She has a right to exercise free will only because she owns the business and properties that her husband manages and has a strong dominating personality. Her depiction is relatively complex. I study Maham's character from an intentional approach to representation. She lives separately from her husband but unlike Anushey she does not divorce him. Her personality gets manipulated in the narrative so she can be used as a bad or a good woman whenever the writer needs. She has been introduced in Anushey's conversation as 'skeptical' and 'suspicious' in the early episodes before her actual entry into the serial, making her seem like bad woman who doubts her husband and quarrels with him. As expected from such a woman, when we first see her, she's on an unannounced raid; she slaps and insults Mehwish and gets Shehwar arrested for fraud and money laundering, just before he and Mehwish are about to marry.

Her personality is presented as more complex later. At one point she asks their servant Dewan about why Mehwish left her husband and if Danish used to beat her. She believes that a woman only leaves her husband if he treats her badly, which raises questions about her own relationship with Shehwar. She asks how Shehwar kept Mehwish, to which Dewan replies 'very happy'. She replies surprisingly,

"Phir aap mujhey call kyun kartay thay? (Then why did you used to call me about Shehwar and Mehwish's affair?)."

Her above lines in the serial reveal the contradictions the writer himself built into her character. On the one hand, she was 'skeptical' and 'suspicious'. On the other, she was not bothered by Shehwar having relationships with other women in her



Maham gets Shehwar arrested by authorities for fraud and forgery.



Maham asks the servant Dewan why he used to call her if Shehwar kept Mehwish happy.

Presumably she was not worried about the affair.



Maham comes to meet Mehwish in the hostel and gives her a cheque.



Rumi proposes to his teacher Hania for his father Danish. She loves the boy like a son.

absence or even marrying someone else. However, her later speech when she tells Shehwar that a woman does not like to give her husband to another woman even if he is stone-hearted contradicts her own words and expressions.

Maham uses strong words for Mehwish and then sympathizes with her situation moments after evicting her; in fact she pays Mehwish the same amount for living with Shehwar as she herself is being paid each month. She initially accuses Shehwar of destroying Mehwish and Danish's married life, but then excuses him and asks him to stay with her, without the fear for her family's reputation after all this defamation. Hers is an exceptional case—a woman who has all the power and money to forgive her husband knowing that he is a cheat, insincere, and blind to his own mistakes. The narrative uses her character to be modern, independent and strong on one hand, but still weak and dependent because she is a woman. *MPTH* concludes with the idea that a 'good woman' may belong to any socioeconomic class but must be loyal to her husband in any case.

Hania's character is stereotypical, a traditional middle-class woman, who is presented as a responsible daughter, best teacher, sister and lover. She is the good woman. She has sympathy for Danish and Rumi. She falls for Danish after Rumi proposes to her and wishes her to marry Danish, knowing how much he still loves Mehwish; she would do so only to console Rumi and Danish and fill the gap that Mehwish has left in their lives. She is seemingly a liberal woman, moderately dressed, but she is given very conventional views about women. At one place she says, 'the one who does not have shame (modesty), is not actually a woman.' She loves Rumi and cares about him not only as a teacher, but like a mother. Her father Mateen (Danish's office colleague) cheated on his wife, Hania's mother, and they got separated later. Hania always quotes how her father felt about a man doubting about his wife (mentioned above in the essay), but she never discusses her father's betrayal nor says anything disparaging about men because she favors being a forgiving woman. As a consequence, she never mentions how her mother felt nor what happened to her. Even so, through the father Mateen's lines, the writer also depicted that her mother as someone who forgave her cheating husband later in life. The serial displays that if one woman does a wrong thing, it affects other women as well who have to pay the price for someone else's sins. Hania ends up losing Danish when he dies, having committed no fault.

Another elite class supporting character is Ayesha, who is a modern, educated, and independent woman. She helps Salman, her husband, in his business. She is also a 'good woman', complexly portrayed in both stereotypical and unique ways. Being stereotypical, as a norm of the upper class, she is not shy about shaking hands or hugging male friends in front of her husband. She dresses in western clothing. She is a strong supporter of love in heterosexual relationships but expresses very traditional beliefs. She favors the loyalty of women but does not discuss how men should behave. She believes that a few women like Mehwish bring bad reflections on other women and become a cause of suspicion for them

She is straightforward and initially refuses to let Mehwish stay at her home. But she is unable to resist her good nature, especially when Salman asks her to. Ayesha helps Mehwish when she tries to commit suicide, provides her shelter, and then helps her in getting a hostel room and a job. She also fights for Mehwish by



Hania is left heartbroken after Danish dies .

having arguments with Danish to let bygones be bygones and accept Mehwish back in his life.

As Vij (2021) argues, "even this new woman ends up reinforcing existing inequalities and conventionality." Through Ayesha and Maham's characters, the drama as a whole communicates that whether she is upper class or middle class, a woman who cannot ask a man for equality; she remains in need of male companionship in her life. The show also depicts both men and women as faithful and unfaithful. However, the male characters can easily get away with their acts and take their places back at home while the women have to pay for the same actions all their lives because they committed an unforgivable sin. Morally the show gives a message to women—be modest, keep your gender's sanctity intact whatever the circumstances, and to accept and adjust to whatever fate offers you.





Ayesha hugs Danish when she meets him in her and Salman's office. She behaves in a modern way but wants the couple to reconcile because of her traditional beliefs.

Ayesha at first refuses to keep Mehwish at her home knowing she was unfaithful to her husband.

Conclusion

This analysis of *MPTH* traces contradictory elements in how TV dramas develop female characters, especially from the middle and upper classes, according to changing gender roles in Pakistan. However, still from a conservative perspective, female characters are supposed to make compromises in their married lives, regardless of their husbands' conduct. They are expected to meet the criteria of a loyal wife and 'good woman', according to the roles society has constructed for them. Television drama mediates changing constructs for genders by depicting more economic and personal freedom for women in daily life but they only experience negative consequences if they challenge male superiority and prerogatives.

In this case, female characterization has been reconstructed by showing a 'bad woman' from the middle class where, in fact, it is rare for women to be unfaithful, though not impossible, and 'loyal women' from the upper class where it is considered more likely to have "careless" women due to their personal and financial freedom and more westernized lifestyle that they have. The male characters, on the other hand, have been depicted above the expectations of society. The traditional patriarchal norms have been emphasized in the series, conveniently through the sympathies gained for the male characters. The conclusion is that enduring and happy family life is dependent on the tolerance and obedience of a woman.

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Notes

- 1. Then Prime Minister Imran Khan gave an interview to CNN blaming women's clothing in sexual violence (https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=Z1eyc2R9A6U) CNN, 23 June 2021. This was months after he denied his own same comments elsewhere said previously. [return to page 1]
- 2. Qamar's most successful work includes drama serials *Boota From Toba Tek Singh* 1999, *Pyare Afzal* 2013, *Sadqay Tumhare* 2014, *Mohabbat Tumse Nafrat Hai* 2017, and films like *Ghar Kab Aao Gay* 2000, *Punjab Nahi Jaoungi* 2017 (one of the highest grossing films of Pakistani cinema)

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Alilunas in June 1992.



Mount Hood

Interview with Peter Alilunas "The master timeline is an adult film history timeline."

by <u>Daniel Laurin</u> transcribed by Lo Humeniuk.

March 25, 2021 on Zoom. Interview on the occasion of Chuck Kleinhans' pornography research collection's arrival at the <u>Sexual Representation</u> <u>Collection</u>, Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, University of Toronto. [March 18, 2021]

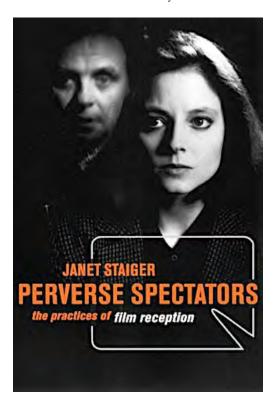
Daniel Laurin: Do you mind if we start with personal and educational history?

Peter Alilunas: I grew up in northern Idaho, in Moscow, Idaho, and after graduating high school [in 1992] ... many of us went on to college in the same town, which was at the University of Idaho.

I realized pretty quickly that it was not something I was really that interested in; I was much more interested in a young person's social adventures, and being with my friends, and just kind of exploring the world a little bit. I did very poorly at university, and was put on academic probation pretty fast—and then was actually [academically disqualified] from the University of Idaho. I spent about the next 10 years just kind of exploring the world, getting into all kinds of different adventures, working many different jobs. I had a lot of very unusual, interesting jobs.

In [2004] I enrolled at Mount Hood Community College, outside of Portland, Oregon, in the United States. I had a wonderful time. I basically immediately felt at home, and loved it, and had all these wonderful teachers, including a great film studies teacher, Jonathan Morrow, who is still there. I did two terms there at Mount Hood, and then I transferred to Lane Community College, which is here in Eugene, Oregon, where I live now, and did two more terms. Then I went to the University of Oregon as an undergrad. I just was completely in love with academia, with learning, with the whole experience. I just couldn't get enough of it. I had wonderful advisors who really changed my life. Kathleen Karlyn was an English professor who did Film Studies at the U of O, and she was my mentor. Pretty quickly she agreed to do an independent study about feminist film criticism with me, which was really life changing. It was during that independent study that I started thinking about graduate school, and she suggested a bunch of graduate schools to me.

I ended up going to the University of Texas at Austin [in 2006], based on her recommendation, to work with Janet Staiger, who was there at the time. Janet was the second really important person in my career because, she—well, first of all, Janet is a monumentally important person in the history of film studies, and



Janet Staiger, mentor at the University of Texas.



Alilunas with Richard Abel at the University of Michigan in 2009.

she is truly a legendary scholar. From the first day of graduate school, she raised the bar for me about expectations. I was professionalized very quickly in the University of Texas, I understood that this was a profession. I knew this was going to be a career for me that I really wanted to take seriously. [Staiger] was a great mentor, just a great, great mentor. I can't speak highly enough of her. She was demanding, she was rigorous. She knew how to push me in all the right ways that make me question everything I did. It was an amazing experience at the University of Texas. I met so many close friends that to this day are part of my academic world. [Staiger] suggested applying to the University of Michigan, which was a very new program at the time for a PhD in Film Studies,[1] [open endnotes in new window] but I liked that. I love the idea of being in on something new. The facilities, the resources, the equipment, and all the things you have access to at Michigan are very world class. I was very fortunate, there was excellent funding [when I arrived in 2008].

My PhD advisor was Dan Herbert. He was and is a tremendous mentor to me, and a great friend. I had other mentors too, like Richard Abel. Just one of the best film historians that has ever lived. He is an expert on silent film history in France, which could not be farther removed from what I do, but he gave me all the tools, and I'm eternally grateful for that. He taught me basically how I do my job to this day. Every day when I get up and work, it's because of the tools he gave me. I don't think he probably ever thought he was going to teach somebody to use those tools on pornography history, but he certainly wasn't upset about it.

They all were very supportive of me. I think one reason I wanted to be a professor is [that] I never wanted to leave the university; and now I never have to.

Laurin: Once you finished your PhD at Michigan, where did you move to?

Alilunas: I finished my PhD... at Michigan [in 2013] and [then worked] as an adjunct in the department, teaching one class and working on various projects. Damon Young was a visiting postdoc and he and I got to be friends. We organized a conference together that year in Michigan which was really memorable.[2]



The conference poster for the "Sex, Media, Reception New Approaches" conference at the University of Michigan in February 2014. Click on it to see whole prograpm in new page.

It's a coincidence, but on the job cycle that year, I applied here at the University of Oregon, which was a job I really wanted. I've lived in Eugene, Oregon on and off since about 1993. It's kind of like a home base: it became my adopted home in the early 1990s. I very much wanted to come back and get that job and I did, so today I am in, essentially, the department I was in as a student. Several of my colleagues were professors here then. The great Mike Aronson, my colleague, was my professor as a student. I go to campus on the same campus where I was a student and teach in the same classrooms I was a student in, which is weird, but also kind of comforting. I love working at the University of Oregon, and it's been a very good home for me.

Laurin: I read in your bio that you now teach in a department that wasn't yet a department when you were there, but that you started there as an undergraduate student and I thought that was very sweet.

Alilunas: When I was a student the [primary] way to get film classes was as an English major, and you would get a Film Studies certificate. They had a very small number of courses that were film related. There was a small but very dedicated group of students who were really into that. I had great friends, and I got that Film Studies certificate. At the time, there were [English department] professors here that did film studies: Kathleen Karlyn and Mike Aronson. Just as I was graduating, the English department announced that they had hired a recent PhD graduate, Priscilla Ovalle from USC. At our graduation ceremony, the film students just being so incredibly excited about this, as alumni. We were like, 'This is amazing! This awesome professor just got hired from USC.' Well, Priscilla is my department head now, and she's also the president of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS). So yes, our excitement was very well warranted: she is a superstar and she's a great colleague.

Laurin: When did your interest in pornography and the porn industry start?

Alilunas: Film Studies has a deep connection to feminism and feminist theory. That's an entry point for a lot of people, as it was for me. As an undergrad, I was really interested in that as a general field. During my MA, I decided to train that interest onto masculinity. I was really diving deep into gender studies and masculinity studies, and ended up writing an MA thesis on the films of Vince

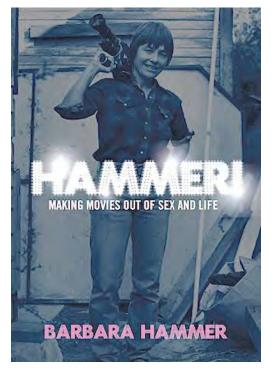




Early interest in screen masculinity and male characters whose comic behavior deflects anxiety. Vince Vaughn, top, and Adam Sandler, below.







Barbara Hammer, whose 1976 film *Dyketactics* was an early feminist film exploring lesbian sexuality.

Vaughn. [3] I was really interested in thinking about these depictions in the early 2000s, [actors such as] Adam Sandler, Will Ferrell, Vince Vaughn and Seth Rogen, and that kind of humor that's deflecting the anxiety underneath. My interests were always in gender, and then sexuality always gets attached to that.

I had a class at Texas with Janet Staiger called "Sexuality in Cinema," [4] and we had a unit in that class about pornography. For my final seminar paper, I decided to write an essay about Candida Royalle. I had come across Royalle's films, in some class readings, [5] and they really stood out to me. That's the first time I really thought about pornography as a topic.

What struck me immediately was that pornography is a perfect end point upon which to analyze gender and sexuality, it's a perfect laboratory. In fact, after you've studied pornography, studying things [about sex and gender] that aren't pornography almost feel like they're missing something, to me. Why bother looking at Vince Vaughn's movies where they *talk* about sex? Instead, let's look at movies where they're actually really doing it, showing it, thinking about it. Once I got a look at that, I thought, 'Okay, that's it. I'm not going to go back.'

Two things happened when I got to my PhD and I was kicking around dissertation ideas. First, the great Barbara Hammer came to our campus to give a talk,[6] and she came to our seminar.

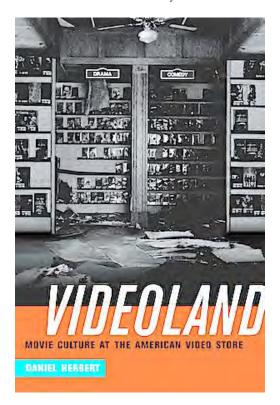
My advisor was there, and the department head was there. I had been kicking around this pornography idea for a while, and my department head turns to me in front of Barbara Hammer, and says, 'So have you decided [on a dissertation topic]?' It was like this existential moment where I was like, 'Barbara Hammer is sitting next to me right now. I have to commit to this right now, publicly, in front of her.' And I did.

Second, in summer 2011, [I worked] for Dan Herbert, who needed a Research Assistant for a book he was going to write about [the remaining] video stores in North America.[7] He was going to drive across the whole country and interview people, and photograph them—a very ambitious idea. He needed a Research Assistant to stay back in Michigan doing leg work and research work, and phone calls and the like. I sprang at that opportunity because I had worked in video rental stores in the 90s. It was a wonderful experience that I loved and had very fond memories of.

The first thing he said to me was: 'I want you to read everything that has ever been written about video stores in academia,' which sounds like an intimidating thing, but it really wasn't... at the time there wasn't that much written. [Afterward] I said: 'Okay, this is great, but where's all this stuff about pornography?' I will tell you what any good PhD student knows: when you spot a gap, that's the equivalent of being handed a present. I just knew. It was like those clouds parted, and a sunbeam came down on my face. I knew instantly: this is a massive and significant research project called *The History of Pornography on Videotape in America*. Now, the ego of a being new PhD student prevented me from understanding that this was massive [and unachievable] scope. Years later, I realized I had only barely scratched the surface.

Laurin: How did you adapt your dissertation to a book?[8] Could you talk about the process of researching your book? It's so meticulously researched; I love the notes and bibliography of it. It's really inspiring—and a little bit daunting—to read through it, because your sources are so vast and varied. Could you describe the process of taking what you had from your dissertation and adapting it or expanding it to a book?

Alilunas: The style of the book comes from the training I had at the University of Michigan.



Working as a research assistant for Dan Herbert for this book.



Model for good writing: Whit Strub.

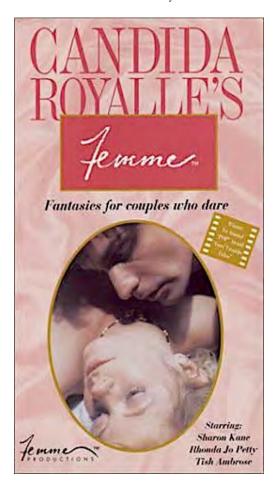
Very intricate historiographic style; exhaustive research, meticulous data collection. [The graduate students] had a real shared spirit of community... we used to bond over the hours spent in front of the microfilm readers. I had such great colleagues at Michigan; Erin Hanna, Nancy McVittie, Dimitrios Pavlounis, Josh Morrison, Nathan Koob, Mike Arnold, Ben Strassfeld, Katy Peplin, and others, and we would sit at the bar and we would talk about these ideas and, that's where I developed trace historiography. I had been trained to write film history by people who had tons of evidence. But when you don't have any stuff, what do you do? I had this idea: if you have all the stuff *around* a footprint, you have a footprint. Because it *makes* a footprint.

It's exhaustive data, basically. We wanted everything. We wanted all of the material we could get our hands on. That came from Richard Abel. We were trained to do this exhaustive style of work. When I started writing my dissertation, I started cataloguing and assembling research materials that grew, and eventually became [what seemed like] thousands of documents, magazines, newspaper clippings. It was something I was learning as I was doing it. I was building systems as I went. It started out with literal filing boxes of paper: I would print everything, and then file it by hand. Over the years that has gone completely digital, I don't use paper anymore at all. But at the beginning it was all paper. Every day, I would file stuff. At the end of the day, the last thing I would do was start filing all the stuff I found. It was exhausting but it was so rewarding.

I had a lot of good inspiration from some other scholars out in the field, foremost among whom is Whit Strub. When I was very early in my PhD, I came across an essay he wrote in the journal *American Quarterly*.[9] It was like seeing what you want yourself to become. I read that essay and thought, 'This is what I want to do. I want to be like this.' I used to read this essay over and over again, like how I imagine musicians listen to a piece of music and then transcribe it. I would read Whit's sentences and look at them and try to figure out how he wrote them. [Later], I cold emailed him saying, 'I love this essay you wrote, and I'm doing this other thing and maybe you have some advice;' I don't remember exactly what I said, but I'm going to be honest, it was essentially a fan letter. Whit's response to me was so generous, and so kind, and so thoughtful, and it opened up to what is now a very abiding and wonderful friendship. I am still a fan; he is still, to me, the best scholar in the field, and he still motivates me to do better.

So anyway, I was very inspired to write the kind of book that I like to read, which was: extremely carefully constructed, dense, and, meticulously footnoted, tracked... I wanted to write what I described to people at the time as being *the* book that people would take off their shelf when they had a question about adult video in North America. That was the goal. It was a very carefully and deliberately thought-out structure.

Another great mentor, of course, was Eric Schaefer, who I've gotten to know well, and he really helped me with this notion, because he had written about something similar.[10] I thought, *Okay. If I can get all the stuff* around *the history, I can write the history.* And that's where that came from. The one last thing I'll say is about the footnotes. I'm a footnote fetishist. Big time. I love footnotes. I knew, when I wrote that book, that there was going be a lot of footnotes. I told Mary Francis, my editor at the University of California Press,[11] who is so wonderful,



Candida Royalle's *Femme* (1984)--pornography for women

that there would be a lot of footnotes. She really went to bat for me with the press to get those included. That's what I wanted: a shadow book, in the footnotes.

Laurin: Two follow up questions. The first is about acquiring these sources, because a magazine like *AVN* doesn't have microfilm. Are you purchasing these magazines on eBay? You reference a lot of newspapers, but how do you get the other ones, the ones that are harder to find, that are in peoples' basements?

Alilunas: That is such a good question, and that question really captures one of the great joys of doing this job, and what I love about it so much, which is the hunt. Somewhere along the line I made this analogy...and this is just my imagination, but I really like to think of myself as a homicide detective. And the murder is the past. I have to figure out who killed it. And that's just a silly little fantasy I have. But I really do imagine myself as sort of like a forensic detective whose skills are very limited, and of course the work is insignificant compared to what real detectives do. But it's a fun way to imagine it. Very early on—I mentioned the hubris and arrogance of youth that I had as a graduate student—I thought I could do this very easily. I realized extremely quickly that, no, I could not do it quickly, easily, or exhaustively. It was going to be impossible. That was a good realization to have. I think every scholar has that realization that they're going to be a small part of something much bigger than themselves, which is academia. It's wonderful.

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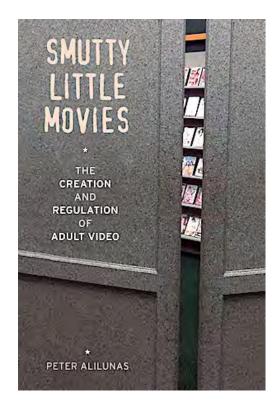
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Alilunas's book *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Univ. of CA Press, 2016).

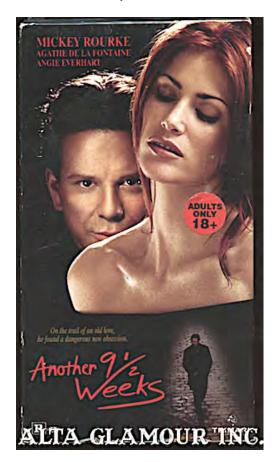
The first thing I did, was I started to spend a lot of time in the library. The University of Michigan has a great library called the Hatcher Graduate Library. I just started to live there in the basement and familiarize myself with the sources. I would get all the sources and then I would start branching off: this person found this thing, and that thing they found has these six things, and these six things have these 10 things. I started to map out all these sources that I thought existed out in the world somewhere; I just had to find them. In those early years, it was really a process of learning how to find stuff. I realized really quickly that finding stuff partly meant buying stuff. The fact is that much of the stuff in that book and in what I do-and in what you do and what we all do in this field-involves competing with collectors. The pornography collecting subculture is serious. They like to buy it, and they'd like to keep it, and they don't necessarily like to share it. I have so many memories of so many lost eBay auctions. [12] [open endnotes in new window] Eventually, in the mid 2000s, some pretty serious collectors started to figure out who I was, and they would start raising their prices on stuff they knew I would want, which was really frustrating. But I also had a lot of very generous collectors who did help me with stuff.

Then of course, there are archives. I did make visits to places like the Kinsey Institute [at Indiana University].[13] I had some mixed emotions about Kinsey; they were very controlling of their collection. The management has changed since then, but they're a little bit notorious for, in my opinion, some excessive rules. I've been to lots of archives around North America, digging for stuff. I love archives; I will work in an archive literally anytime I get a chance. I love it, it's one of my favorite things.

I want to give a special mention of some dealers: there's collectors, and then there are dealers. Pretty early on I met a dealer in Seattle who runs a bookshop called Alta Glamour.[14] His name is Ivan Stormgart. Ivan is a real hero of what we do. This bookstore in Seattle is not really open to the public, it's more like a closed situation and then they sell online. A few years ago, I finally managed to actually go up to Seattle and meet Ivan, who I have been working with for years... he has supplied me with the most rare, incredible, helpful material.

He's contacted me when he thinks he might have something I could use; he's been generous about his prices with me, considering it's his profession and making a living dealing it. When I went up to visit him, he was so thoughtful and kind, and let me hang out in his store which is not open to the public, it's dealers like that that are so important. I'll also mention... Joe Rubin, who runs Vinegar Syndrome, [15] which is a preservation and distribution company for adult films. Joe is a good friend to me. Joe has forgotten more about adult film history than I will ever learn, and is an incredible resource, and he's hooked me up with other non-academic historians that have helped me. The sources are very complicated, and it's painstaking and frustrating and it's very expensive. This is one reason why I am so delighted by what Patrick Keilty is doing at the University of Toronto with the [Sexual Representation Collection] archive there. It warms my heart, because of the years I spent—especially those early years—trudging through the wilderness alone trying to locate stuff, which was almost impossible.

Laurin: The second question that I had is that I wonder if you could talk about your process beyond, or after, the accumulation part. How do you deal with all of this and keep it organized and accessible, and then, synthesize it? Once you do this kind of research, which involves so much accumulation, how do you then take





One small section of Alta Glamour in Seattle, Washington. They also have an online catalogue.

it to the next step?

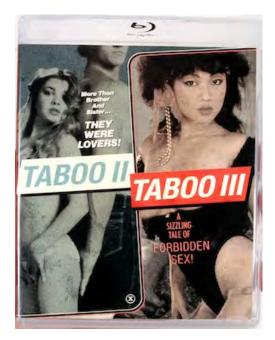
Alilunas: I'm an extremely meticulous and organized person. This kind of work really appealed to me because I am very structured and disciplined about organization, and so I had to build my own systems for keeping track of all this, which really appealed to me. Very early on, I started keeping these really deep spreadsheets and tracking material, identifying it, and creating my own metadata systems. Now, I'm not a software engineer and I'm not an archivist. I talk to those people a lot, and I've worked with those people a lot. I'm grateful for them, but I'm not one of them. So, my systems are probably nothing compared to their actual data systems, just to be clear. But that stuff appeals to me.

When I started gathering up all this material, I made a decision really early on to start assembling my own timeline. This is the primary method I use to this day for organizing material: I create timelines for every project that I do, big or small. I also have one—I call it the master timeline—it's an adult film history timeline, that I'm constantly adding to, and footnoting, and adding references to. When I start a project, I assemble a timeline. Then that timeline has attachments and files, footnotes and citations, and then that document becomes the thing that sits next to me while I'm working on the eventual publication.

I create the narrative out of the timeline. The eventual publication may not be in chronological order, it may only use certain things. But the timeline is really where I keep my brain. The timeline for the book *Smutty Little Movies* was...I'm not even sure how many pages it ended up being, but it was close to one hundred pages long. It was a chronological point-by-point set of details, so I could go back and say, 'Okay, Magnavox released this VCR on this date, and then this company licensed their film on this date, and then this court case happened on this date.' I could start to see in my mind a reconstruction. That's where that footprint comes from. Once you have the smoke, you can assemble what the history was. So, for me assembling those timelines has been the way I organize my information. I have many of them now: I'm working on a piece now about the history of adult film here in Eugene, and so I'm making one for that project.[16]

The other advantage to that system is that, as a professor, you have to learn to do research in very small blocks of time. You might have 20 minutes to research, and then you have to go back to a committee meeting or read a dissertation, or prep for a class. Then you might get 20 minutes again, three weeks from now. Then two months from now, you might have one good full solid day, eight hours. These timelines really help me with that, because I can pick them up again and say like,





Joe Rubin who runs Vinegar Syndrome has helped Alilunas meet non-academic historians in the field.

'Okay, great. I have 20 minutes. Here's everything I've collected on this topic chronologically.' Boom, I'm right back where I was three weeks ago. That has been a huge help for me.

I'm a big proponent of and believer in outlines. I'm an obsessive outliner; I might make 25 outlines of something before I write the actual thing. The next book I'm going to write, I have files and files of potential structures and timelines I've worked out, and outlines. It's a way to organize the information for me mentally before I ever actually do it. So those are kind of the primary ways: I keep these databases of the material, then the timelines that synthesize it, and then outlines to organize it. That's my method.

Laurin: This is just a tiny kind of procedural question, but, when you talk about the timelines, is that a spreadsheet? Is that a Word document?

Alilunas: Yeah, it's just a Word document. Over the years, I have tried other methods. I'd say maybe every six months, I get curious to see what new tools are out there. Maybe about a year ago, I experimented with OneNote as one potential way to organize information. Inevitably, I just go back to a Word document. It's simple, it's easy, effective for me.

March: Magnetic Communications sends out flyer to 3000 industrial video equipment dealers offering 20 adult titles on tape. 168

April: Videography magazine: Home Cinema Service advertisement. 169

 (Joel Jacobson) runs an "advertorial" in announcing the sale of the Meyer and Metzger films. "The price of each tape, offered in %" or Betamax formats, is about \$300."

May 15: Los Angeles Times: classified advertisement for "adult films \$69" in the video tapes section. 170

NOTE: first classified ad for porn tapes.

Sample from Alilunas timeline. Click on it to see whole page, with sources detailed in footnotes.

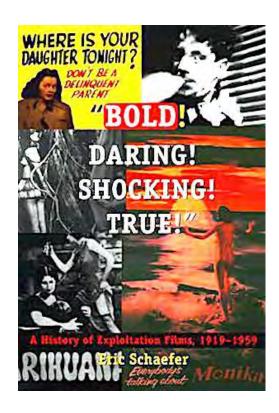
I'll keep trying new tools, and maybe one day I'll find something better, but for now that works. Excel spreadsheets to organize data materials, too.

Laurin: This is less of a procedural question and more of an ideological question. Porn is a difficult subject to research, and a difficult one to teach. How do you position yourself, or how *have* you positioned yourself in relationship to porn and in the field? Queer scholars have an identity bent that they can go with, and the history of gay porn really starts there. And women working in the field can draw on the very rich set of debates that inaugurated the discipline. I wonder how you place yourself in relation to all of those things, and how you kind of position yourself as a porn scholar?

Alilunas: That's a really good question that I've thought a lot about over the years. First of all, I'll say that I'm very passionate about our field as a field, and I think most people who know me and have worked with me know my dedication to our field itself. I really believe in keeping it alive and fertilized and watered and cared



Video stores usually had a special room for selecting porn tapes or DVDs.

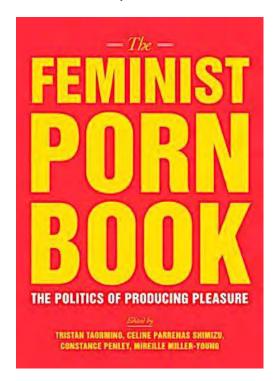


for and respected. I have such a deep respect for the elders who worked in this field. I feel so fortunate to have gotten to know so many of our elders. Linda Williams has been a great mentor to me, and so kind and generous to me over the years. Constance Penley, Eric Schaefer, Gayle Rubin, Chuck Kleinhans, Peter Lehman, Tom Waugh, and on and on. I'm forgetting so many people, but I have such a profound respect for those people and what they've built, and I've been really committed to making sure we keep building and keeping that structure going. That's really important to me.

How I've positioned myself as a scholar is a good question, and it ties into maybe how I perceived myself when I first entered the field as a professor. There were lots of people who tried to talk me out of doing this. They tried to talk me out of the dissertation, telling me to just write a paper and be done with it. They said, 'You're never going to get a job.' 'You're never even going to get an interview!' You know. And then when I did get on the job market, they said 'Well, you might get an interview, but you're not going to get hired!' When I got hired, they told me, 'Well, you might get hired, but you're not going get tenure!' From the very beginning, I have always said the same exact thing, which is that if you do really good quality work, and you are a good colleague—a kind, empathetic, valuable colleague—that will show, and people will know; they'll see it. That's all I ever tried to do: I tried to do really good work and be a really good colleague. That's the first layer to how I position myself: I will do rigorous work that's based in good training, and I will do it well. Then I will be a good colleague to you in the hallway, and at faculty meetings and everywhere else. The second layer was that I positioned myself as a film historian, which I was trained in and believed in and really thought of myself as. I used to say, 'Well, I'm just a film historian, I just use the tools on adult film history.' It's the same toolkit. I just do it on this instead of that. The third layer was that I was a very passionate advocate for making this work visible, and treated with respect, and opened up to the world, and treated in a way that was accessible and of interest to people. I don't want to say 'nonthreatening' or something like that, because I actually think there's some value to that. That says more about the person receiving it than the person who's putting it out. I've never been very confrontational about it, I guess. For example, I've never tried to be aggressive about picking fights with anti-pornography folks.

To your specific question, though: how did and how do I position myself in terms of my identity and background and whatnot. I'm a cis, hetero, white male scholar. I really believe that it's a responsibility that I have to assist in any way that I can, with whatever privilege [I have], to assist this field. In the past few years, especially, I've tried to look for opportunities, to kind of get out of the car from the front seat, and then get back into it again in the back seat. Like, 'Hey, I have a little bit of experience driving, but maybe I can help navigate.' I think that's been a really interesting process for me, a very good and healthy process, and one I've really enjoyed. I think it's good to amplify voices that aren't yours. I've been trying to think about the field from that kind of perspective. The last thing that anything in academia needs right now is a straight white guy being defensive about straight white guy things. It's not useful, not needed.

My research tends to focus on straight pornography history. Over the years that has kind of ebbed and flowed in different directions, and I think I try to turn the lens a little bit, now, in ways I didn't used to. I try to do this carefully, because the



Scholars whose mentorship Alilunas is thankful for: Eric Schaefer (top) and Constance Penley (bottom).

last thing I want to do is write histories of people [and groups of which I'm not a part]. I try to be very cautious about that, and those are the cases when I try to amplify and assist. I know a lot of great scholars working on a lot of great topics, and I want to help in any way that I can. That said, I do think that the straight pornography industry history is still virtually untouched, and there's plenty of work to do. It's not like there's a shortage of stuff to work on. To kind of distill it all down: my identity as a scholar these days is someone trying to respect the field, build it up and amplify people, and use whatever experiences I've had to solidify it and keep it going.

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Laurin: I like that. I'd like to talk a little bit about [the Adult Film History Scholarly Interest Group in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies]. Could you describe the conversations that happened around the founding, specifically around choosing the name? Do you have any reflections about how it has grown?

Alilunas: I have a lot of good memories of SCMS, but also a lot of [complicated feelings]. SCMS is the premier scholarly organization in our field, and it's been a second home to me for many years. In the early years of [going to] SCMS I felt energized there. I'm a bit of an extrovert, and I know many scholars who are introverts who have a much different experience of SCMS than I do. SCMS has always been very invigorating for me. I look forward to it. When I go there, I'm energized. It keeps me going for the year, and I've made so many good friends there. But I will say that in some of the early years, at times, it was very isolating, because there were not many people then working on pornography studies. I did feel a little bit as though I was out on an island: wandering around, looking for people. There was a very small group of people working on it, most of whom, actually, are not in the field anymore. But I did have a lot of good times with them and establishing those early connections. In those early years, we were all very intimidated by some of our elders. As you are when you're starting out in grad school, it's very intimidating to think about actually meeting someone whose work means so much to you.

Quick side anecdote: [early in] graduate school at the University of Texas, I sat in Janet Staiger's office and had this meeting with her, and right behind her on the bookshelf was Eric Schaefer's dissertation.[17] [open endnotes in new window] It was about this thick, or it felt like it was this thick [holds his fingers 8 inches apart] and his name was written on the side of it. I just remember sitting there looking at her and thinking, 'Oh my God, that's what I have to live up to? Maybe I shouldn't do this. Maybe I can't do this!' I just sat there staring at that dissertation thinking I might be [in] over my head.

A couple of years later when I went to SCMS for the first time, I remember seeing Eric across the room at the reception. I could not get up the nerve to go talk to him. I was too nervous! It was maybe a year after that I finally went up to him introduced myself. He was very gracious. What a generous person. A year after that, I actually had a more meaningful conversation with him. As I got to know him and got more experience working with him, he had this idea that he shared with me of making a scholarly interest group at SCMS for people who were doing this work, because it was starting to grow. We were starting to see more and more people every year at SCMS working on these topics. He had the idea for the SIG, and invited me to help him kind of put it together. While I agreed to help him put it together, I really didn't do very much. Eric was a force, and really skilled at navigating the bureaucracy of SCMS. He'd been doing it for many years, and he'd been on many committees. He taught me a lot about how to navigate bureaucracy in general, but especially SCMS bureaucracy. So, he did all of the legwork of actually putting together a SIG; which is pretty complicated and time consuming and intricate; you had to get a certain number of votes and members and support declarations and all this stuff.

Then we had a meeting [at SCMS].[18] Eric called a meeting of people to announce this idea. It was a great meeting, all these great scholars were in the room, and I got elected as co-chair, with Eric, of the first year of the SIG. To this day, it's still one of the great honors of my career: to be the first co-chair with Eric









The trajectory of "film studies," leading it to become "media studies."

of the SIG that he created. The name? There was a little bit of debate about the name.[19] Eric's legacy is embedded in that name: it was his idea, and he was very determined to have it be that. He thought that that name captured something about what the field had grown into, but also how it could be accepted into SCMS. I certainly aligned myself with that paradigm.

I think that today it may have grown so far beyond *just* adult film history. It's weird how that happens with any organization; how the name almost stops having a lot of meaning... I feel like we could definitely rename the SIG to be more reflective of what it actually does. [Laughs] I'm laughing because film studies has this absurd tradition of debates about names—it's just endless. I mean, SCMS had this debate and they used to be the Society for Cinema Studies. They had this very contentious debate [about adding "Media"], and then the journal had to be renamed.[20] My old department in Michigan went through a renaming.[21] When we formed our department here in Oregon, we had a debate about the name: we're a Cinema Studies department, but we literally define cinema as being media. You can do this forever; you can rename things forever. So, I tend to think of the SIG name as... an honouring of Eric's legacy as the person who created it. Someday, when we're all gone, someone will rename it something else and they'll be like, I heard there was a person named Eric once or Alilunas once.

Laurin: Thank you for that. I'd like to talk about about the donation to the Sexual Representation Collection. And then, moving backwards from that: could you talk how you got to know Chuck, and how the idea to get all of his vast collection—or at least *some* of what his vast collection—to the SRC? Where did the seed of that come from?

Alilunas: I knew Chuck Kleinhans' work. Chuck was a very significant person in film studies and in academia with a huge reputation that I knew about; what a personality, and a character, and a person: a human. One of the most generous academics, I think... and that showed in his work. Which is to say, his co-founding of *Jump Cut*, the many times he helped younger scholars. I knew about all this; I knew about his reputation. Of course, I knew about Jump Cut. I knew he had written an essay about video pornography that was really formative for me, and it was one of the only published pieces about the adult video industry.[22] I treasured that essay. That sets the stage. In [2009], I was at a conference in Portland, Oregon, called the What is Film Conference. [23] Very small regional conference; one of the great little conferences. Chuck was there. Not presenting; he was just there, just was watching presentations. He came to my presentation, which was about adult video, and he asked questions during the Q&A. They were very good, but also very hard questions, After the panel I went over to him in the crowd. He was sitting there with his partner Julia Lesage, and I introduced myself to him and told him how much I appreciated him and his work and his questions. That was it, we just had a pleasant little moment. I think a couple of months later, I was back in Michigan and I needed an outside member on my dissertation committee. He accepted. I had a few interactions with him over the following years, always very pleasant. We always had very pleasant correspondences, even after I was a professor and moved to Eugene. We chatted a few times here and there at events, and it was always very pleasant.

Then of course, Chuck died, in 2017. Very unexpectedly, was very tragic. It was very shocking. Shortly after Chuck died, Julia reached out to me and said, 'I have this giant collection of Chuck's materials, and I don't really know what to do with it. Would you like it?' Long story short, I immediately said, 'Yes, Chuck's collection should be preserved.' I think a week later I drove over to their home—which is maybe a mile from my house, it's just down the road. Now, Chuck and



Chuck Kleinhans was on the editorial board of *Porn Studies* but always objected to its decision not to publish images, which he felt was a necessity if one were going to write on the topic.

Julia were legendary for their library, and it's very hard to describe, but I'll try. They refinished their garage and turned it into a library, and they had these long bookcases. I want you to imagine a twelve-foot-long long bookcase, as if you're in an actual library. They might have had six or seven of these lining the garage. You would walk up and down the garage in aisles, and both sides of the bookcase would have books. There were thousands of books. Probably the biggest home academic library I've ever seen. It was legendary; I knew all about it, I had just never seen it. I went in and I saw it, and Julia said 'Here's the collection.' It was massive. It was overwhelming. It was completely daunting. Julia was going through Chuck's library and donating it out to different places and different people, and she had parceled out just the pornography collection for me. The overall collection was beyond description, but just this part of the collection was completely overwhelming. It took multiple trips, lugging these giant boxes out to my car, driving them back to my house, lugging them into my garage. It was just completely overwhelming. Daniel, you know some of this because, to cut to the end of the story, now you have it.

Laurin: I unpacked them all.



Sorting and repacing the Kleinhans collection in the Alilunas garage.

Alilunas: I will describe to you what it was like when it first got to me. It was many boxes, dozens of boxes that had fallen apart; in some cases, been damaged by water, some were moldy. Chuck had wrapped everything inside these boxes within plastic—garbage bags, basically. When it all got into my garage, I spent about a year, on and off, periodically, opening up each box, and then transferring it to a clean new cardboard box, then getting rid of the plastic and the old, destroyed cardboard. I don't know exactly how many boxes I went through, but more than 50, less than 100, probably. Immediately I knew the value of this, because, first of all, there were hundreds of videotapes. Chuck had, for decades, I think, been dubbing tapes himself on his own private collection. It was so overwhelming that I didn't even attempt to figure out what was on the tapes [other than what was on the labels]. Then of course, he had a commercial collection too. He had hundreds... of commercially available tapes and DVDs. The first thing I did was



Chuck Kleinhans in his crowded Northwestern University office.





At one conference, Chuck lectured on the Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee tape, while letting the whole tape play onscreen behind him for his talk

separate all that stuff out, put it into clean boxes. That was the easy part. Then there were the books. He had many books that I also just separated out, and some magazines. But then he had—and Daniel, this is the part of your life now that is complicated and confusing—but he had many boxes of paper. The paper was totally overwhelming to me. Because it was stuff of his research, stuff of his teaching, student work. A lot of it was in his own... whatever his own system was for filing it. Let's just be honest: he had died, and the secrets of that system were gone. I tried to assemble it into as clean a collection as I could, and then preserve it

Julia told me that one of his real ambitions was to create a website. He had this kind of multimedia idea—I think back in the 1990s when it was still a new concept—to have a multimedia publication about some fetish things he was interested in, specifically shoes. He wanted to write a history of the shoe fetish in a multimedia way, and so he had these vast files of stuff for that. He had many files related to his publications that he had done; books he wanted to write but never finished. Some *Jump Cut* related stuff. Just a staggering peek into the career of a scholar.

It took me about a year of cleaning it, putting it into new boxes, and then storing it again. Then Patrick Keilty and I worked out an arrangement that Julia was happy with, which was donating it to the [Sexual Representation Collection at the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at the] University of Toronto,[24] and that took a while to process that procedure. Then it was during the Coronavirus pandemic, pretty early on actually, that we finally arranged for a moving company to come to my home [which happened in July 2020].

Laurin: It was such a wild thing to unpack, and pulling out some of the things from the collection was really remarkable. Like the illustrated report on the Committee for Pornography and Obscenity[25], which I didn't know existed, which is a fantastic artifact. Pulling up Chuck's copy of the Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee tape was really special because I write about in my own work, and his work on it has been really formative for me. Seeing his handwritten label on that tape was really something. All these porn Beta cassettes were really interesting too; there were commercial porn Betas, and then also what I would describe as Beta mixtapes. It was fascinating and also, as you said, overwhelming. And I can't imagine what it would have been like to deal with the top of the funnel, and not just the bottom of the funnel, which is what I got.

Alilunas: I had similar experiences. Like, seeing his notes for the ["Change from Film to Video Pornography"] essay that was so influential on me. But the thing that really struck me is that, when you think about the history of the Internet, those early days of the Internet were like the Wild West: people didn't really know what it was yet. Chuck clearly was going to message boards in the early days of the Internet, and printing pictures that he found there, and saving them. When I say printing pictures, I don't mean like five or 10. I'm talking about—you've seen them—hundreds. When I found those I stopped in my tracks because I thought, *this is a genuine artifact that I'm looking at.* This is a trace of the early Internet in my hand. A cheap printout of a photo that he found on message boards—this is the early Internet pornography, right here in my hand. I don't know how to deal with that. They're not dated, but they're fascinating. I was very excited to send those to you, even though I have no idea what you'll do with them. Maybe nothing. To me, that was like... beyond description, how interesting this is.

Laurin: As soon as you started saying 'The early days of the Internet,' I knew that the end of the sentence was going to be that, yes, Chuck printed it. Chuck printed out the early Internet. And now it's in boxes.

Alilunas: Yeah. He tried to make physical the virtuality of the early Internet; I think, for himself, to make sense of it. To make files of the printouts from the virtual space.

Laurin: I'm looking at early-2000s Internet porn, and a lot of it is just gone. So much of it has just disappeared. The internet doesn't archive itself, and no one's really taking care of it. His instincts were correct.

Alilunas: Yes. I'm working on the very early stages of a book about the pre-history of the Internet, ending where he was printing. To see those was...it was also just a glimpse into his mind. He had to sit there at his desk, and it probably took a really long time to download each photo, and then a long time to print each photo. Then he would slip it into a file folder, I'm guessing. Just, really something. Then of course, there's tons and tons of little nifty personal correspondences and stuff, with folks in the field, just a treasure trove of little hidden delights. It was a real pleasure to go through that process, and I was obviously delighted to donate it, with Julia's permission, to an archive where other people can see what I got to see privately for a year in my garage. I got to have the private archive for a year; that was a treat.

Laurin: Even having a condensed version of that felt very special for me as well. His collection took up an entire room, and to be in the room where it all was at the same time—and to be physically moving it from box to box—was really very special. So, it seems we have similar versions of the same experience.

Alilunas: One of the recent highlights of my career was coming to Toronto and working in [the SRC], briefly, for a couple of days [in 2018].



The Sexual Representation Collection, housed within the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto.

I really look forward to coming back and working there again, and seeing Chuck's collection there when I come back. That's going to be one of those full-circle career moments: I sat on the floor of my garage organizing those tapes, and then someday I'm going to go to the archive and see them on the shelf, preserved. I think that's going to be a highlight.

Laurin: I'm very excited for what's next for the SRC. And the kind of

infrastructure that Patrick has set up for it moving forward is really exciting. You had mentioned your next book project—would you mind telling me a bit about the project and how it began?

Alilunas: My next book project came from finishing the last one. I think when I finished *Smutty Little Movies*, and it was actually done—in my hand, and in the world—I was pretty mentally exhausted as you would expect. It had been many years in the making, and I was really kind of burned out on it. Frankly, I didn't want to think about VHS tapes or video pornography for a while. I made a very conscious decision to not do anything. *I'm not going to do any research, except for the little tidbits I had committed to*; *I'm not going to start anything new for a while. I'm just going to take a break.* It was so liberating. I didn't feel any pressure of any kind.

Then... a few years ago, that I caught myself: I was sitting at my computer, and I... realized I had been intricately reading this thing for hours. It was like a jolt, and I stopped... I had an out-of-body recognition of what I was doing: reading about the history of bulletin board systems on the early connected computers. I stopped myself and thought, Why am I reading about this? Why is this interesting to me? Why am I lost in this? For a few days, I just kept thinking, something has happened. I realized over a few days that what had happened was that my brain had turned itself back on again, to do that kind of deep research we were talking about earlier. That meticulous gathering of evidence was starting to happen again. It was happening about this history of bulletin board systems, and specifically about how pornography was exchanged on these bulletin board systems. I realized that I was, in my free time over a few weeks and months, reading and cataloging this stuff. It was as though all those old skills and techniques and habits were coming back to life. Gradually, over about six months, I started really seriously thinking about this topic, about how pornography was exchanged over computer networks. So, I started poking around, jotting down notes, and just thinking about it, and then that gradually became more serious.

I thought, *Okay, if this is it, maybe this is a journal article. Well, no, it's too big for that. Okay, so let's start thinking about case studies, and start expanding, and thinking more and more and bigger and bigger and bigger.* I'd say about a year went by—thinking bigger and bigger and bigger—until I finally realized that this was probably the start of a book. Does that mean it's a book I want to write? At that point, I started putting together one of those timelines I mentioned — spreadsheets, and notes— and started structuring outlines, really thinking about it. I still wasn't talking to anybody about it, because I wanted to just stay in my own headspace for as long as I could. Eventually, after about a year, I realized I had the outline of a book. That book is tentatively called *PrOn 1.0: The Prehistory of Online Pornography.* "PrOn" being P-R-zero-N, the sort of slang term for pornography that people used to try to get around web filters in the 1990s.

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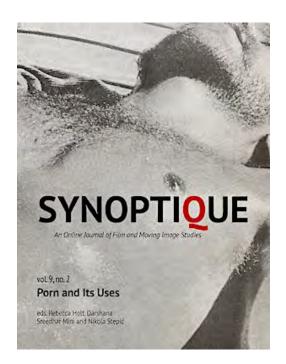
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Synoptique, open access media studies journal from Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University, Montreal. "Porn and its Uses" Special Issue, 9.2, Ed. Rebecca Holt, Darshana Sreedhar Mini, and Nikola Stepić. Free download of issue in PDF. https://www.synoptigue.ca/issue-9-2

The basic pitch... is that the book will end when the Internet begins. It's everything about pornography that led up to pornography on the Internet. That story is really surprisingly all about what we would now think of as networked systems, about sharing pornography. But it goes all the way back to people sending erotic messages over telegraph systems, and building from there all the way to the histories of computers, and how people used computers to exchange erotic material, and how the development of computers is really tied into that; how each new technological step was accompanied by something pornographyrelated. I just started making lists of case studies and ideas, and little things I could look at. Those case studies became chapter outlines, and then that became a more formal kind of proposal. I think it was two or three years ago I went to SCMS and gave a presentation about one of those case studies. [26] [open endnotes in new window] I did that very deliberately as a test. I wanted to see how it would be received by people, because it's not really about film: it's about the history of computer networks. The response was really great. People loved it, and I pitched it to some presses. I've been moving forward on that for a few years now. The kind of work that I do takes a long time. I would not expect see this finished book for another at least three, or four more years. It's a very painstaking process, as you know. Many pieces of evidence need to be found, and then interviews need to be done. But I'm super excited about it, and I feel like it's got the potential to be a really interesting, provocative, and frankly, engaging book. The kind of writing that I do, I want people to be engaged, and even maybe a little bit entertained. I think it has the potential for that.

Laurin: If you have time, maybe we could end with the topic of teaching pornography. What have you found to be difficult, either at the institutional level or with the students? Could you talk about your own history of teaching porn, and maybe about where you would like your teaching to go that it has not been able to yet?

Alilunas: This is such a good and timely question. There is a special issue of the journal Synoptique coming out soon; I'm part of a roundtable on that was organized by Kyler Chittick. [27] We address this exact topic in that issue, so people will be able [to see my] contemporaneous thoughts to this interview on this topic there as well. At the beginning of my career—which is to say, when I very first started teaching, in graduate school—I was very influenced by an interview that Kevin John Bozelka had done with Peter Lehmann and Linda Williams in The Velvet Light Trap. [28] In that interview, they both talk about how one needs to be careful when teaching pornography, because how you approach it can determine in advance how students perceive it. If you frame it as being something dangerous, students will think of it as dangerous. If you give content warnings where you say, 'This is going to be really offensive,' then that's how it will be perceived. I was really influenced by that. I felt strongly at the time that adult films needed to be taught in a sort of neutral kind of perspective, to allow students to come to the material and experience it and form their own conclusions, the same way we would teach any other topic. That was my perspective: just teach it like anything else.

Then I started to notice a few years ago that culture was changing so much that maybe that perspective needed to be revisited. There's a certain strain of culture now—conservative culture—that is determined to draw people into false debates just so they can declare victory or find loopholes. It's wanting to draw people in to



Teaching about exploitation film: it is offensive.

fake fights, and then declaring victory, or waiting for people to make mistakes. Anti-pornography culture has been around for decades, way before I was in this field, and it will still be around after I'm gone. But the current strain of anti-pornography culture has changed in some unique ways. At the same time, culture in general has changed to be more aware of—and more sensitive to—systems of oppression, and ideologically problematic content that has made film studies more aware of itself in some healthy ways. There's an effect on pornography studies because of this, though. For example, in my conventional film history course, I spend more time now putting context to certain kinds of films; in the same way that Turner Classic Movies now has more context for certain kinds of films, I do that too.[29]

But if I teach an entire class—like my exploitation film class—that entire class is literally about the things that are offensive. It's not a maybe, it *is*. It's a new challenge to tell students that we're not going to have any space in this course to debate whether or not this is offensive. It is offensive: we can just say that right up front, and we can move on from it. That's weird for them, because they're kind of used to having a sense of caution around everything, to being aware of things *maybe* being offensive. But the fact is, is a lot of this stuff just *is* offensive in the exploitation class. That's something that has changed; ten years ago, I would not have even contemplated that, I would have just taught the class. Now I have to have a preamble where I say, *Listen*, *it's offensive*. *Let's not debate it*.

Early in my career as a professor, the University of Oregon was not terribly keen on me teaching a full class on pornography. They never came right out and said that, but they kind of tried to steer me toward other topics, which was fine. Before I was tenured, I really wasn't trying to raise stressors for anybody. I was tenured a few years ago, though, and when I was tenured, I said to my department, Okay, I have tenure now; let's think about doing this. They've been perfectly willing to do that. It's just a matter of finding the right time. To be frank, the pandemic kind of threw a wrench into some of those plans; we thought that introducing that topic on Zoom wouldn't be the ideal place, for the first time. I have taught some graduate seminars on sexually explicit material, which has always been great. Graduate students are a delight; I love working with them and teaching them. Undergrads, for the most part, tend to self-select my courses. They know what I study, they know what I teach; nobody comes to my classes surprised. [Among others] I teach two courses every year: censorship, and exploitation film. They're a pair, they go together. You can take them separately, but they're intended to go together as being...alternate film histories, is how I conceive them. I also teach the conventional film history course, so if you take me you get all of it. In all three of those classes, I teach about pornography and the pornography industry, and pornography history.

So yes, I think that times have changed. That's good; times are always changing. The last thing that you want to do is hold on to some past notion of something, you should always be adapting. About six years ago now, [a close friend and] I had a conversation about trigger warnings, because at the time, it was a very contentious thing; there were battle lines being drawn. [They] said, 'We're not in the business of tricking students. Why would you do that? Why would you trick students?' That was really influential to me. [We should be thinking about] empathy and kindness and care. Anything we can do to be empathetic and kind to students, we should do it. I interpret this as not walking them into a trap, [as if] we know better, like *Okay, we're going to watch this film today, everybody buckle up because you're going to be traumatized, which is good for you.* That's actually cruel, and I don't want to be cruel to students. I'm very empathetic to students who have concerns about things based on life experiences; especially life experiences that I don't have, with my unearned privilege.

All of that said, I also still firmly believe in the value of studying this material rigorously, clinically, with academic discipline. I have a long paragraph on my syllabus about how if students are unable to approach these topics with scholarly rigor this might not be the course for them. I'm happy to talk to students about all of it in detail, but if you feel like you can't do that, maybe you shouldn't take my class. Specifics: I don't give trigger warnings before screenings. I don't give trigger warnings before particular topics in class. I give a general content advisory at the beginning of the term that I'm very specific about, and very detailed. I make the students take a syllabus quiz, where they acknowledge that they've read that paragraph. I invite them to share with me specific concerns that they have, or, if they are comfortable, issues in their life, and I'm happy to lay out a roadmap for them. Like I said, I don't want to ever be in the business of tricking people, or being cruel to people because I think it will help their educations. I do make it very clear what we're going to study, and why we're studying it. Then I invite them to be part of the important process of studying this material, which I think has tremendous value for the world, even though in many cases it's offensive, harmful, or dangerous. Many of the great scholars in our field have pointed this out well before me: just because we study something, does not mean we support it, or we are voting for, it or financing it. A lot of the things that the adult film industry did are cruel and terrible and dangerous and gross. My teaching it does not mean I advocate for any of those things, it just means that I'm a historian who studies those them. Not everything the industry did is terrible, not everything the industry did is good. That's the same with any industry; is not unique to pornography. Gayle Rubin taught me that... when she said that it is a total fallacy to suggest that pornography is somehow unique [in that regard].[30]

Laurin: Especially in the context of cinema studies, which has a terrible history of poor labor practices and shady deals. I do something similar to what you described in my courses, and I think that collecting all these practices of care is really helpful for people teaching porn. These are things that were taught to me, that I've taught to other people, that I'm sure I'll be learning so many more. It's really just about taking care of the students in the class so that they're able to engage with the material as best they can.

Alilunas: Let's also be really honest here: in the United States—and I think it's safe to say, to a certain extent in Canada—there is a complete failure of sex education and media literacy education. It's a double whammy of terribleness. Film scholars and pornography scholars in particular are tasked—unfairly, and shamefully—with somehow filling that role. I am not trained to be a health educator for twenty-year-olds. That is not something I'm interested in doing, and not trained to do. Yet, unfortunately, that is the reality; pornography has taken on the mantle of sex education in this world, which is frankly ridiculous. That's the equivalent of a high school basketball coach showing you a movie about basketball and saying,



Teaching Russ Meyer: you do not have to value the material itself.

This is how you're going to learn basketball now! It's a ridiculous situation. I love how you said it... what was your phrase, was it 'Strategies of care'?

Laurin: Practices of care. I had a weird email exchange with an aunt of mine who teaches in a PR program. She emailed a few family members a 'satirical post' she had read somewhere about cancel culture. The gist of it was that everyone is so sensitive now that teachers can no longer teach Dickens to their students, that there would have to be trigger warnings around each chapter. My mother and I exchanged a flurry of emails about how to address the situation. I eventually wrote back to my aunt to try to explain my situation, telling her that I teach materials that are categorically offensive and even distressing, and that I haven't had any pushback. It might be the fact that she has a teaching position and does not have that kind of institutional support. I think she felt that she was in a battle, constantly, with the students. I acknowledge that sometimes there will be some students who want to get a 'gotcha' moment; there will be some students who want to show that you're doing something wrong. But I explained my process of explaining why we're studying certain materials, and how I express to my students that I'm going to do my best to take care of them in the process. I'm not sure how much of it got through, but my intention was to explain that it's not all about content warnings, or that I shy away from discussing difficult issues for fear of retribution, but that it's simply about putting yourself in the position of your students and demonstrating that you're doing these things for them. You're showing that you're cognizant of these debates and conversations, and that you're aware that your life experiences differ from those of your students, and that you're constantly taking their well-being into account.

Alilunas: That's just extremely well said. My guiding ethos is one of empathy. I say to myself, Okay, put yourself in the position of the person in the class who's watching this, and they're seeing you say something about it. Do you really want to say something that's not empathetic to the kind of universal human experience as much as you can? But you're absolutely right, the cancel culture fears, especially of the older generation, feels very alienating to them. And scary. I mean, I teach on Russ Meyer, and believe me, there's nothing more offensive than Russ Meyer. It can be done! You just have to do it in a way that acknowledges what you're doing and why, and in a way that isn't defensive about it or values the material. I think part of it is that people want to value things from the past, as if the present is somehow dependent on that. The truth is... my life will not demonstrably change if Russ Meyer is valued or not. Russ Meyer existed. He made films, those films existed, we can look at them. But if someone doesn't like those films or finds them offensive—which they are—that's not going to demonstrably alter the fabric of the universe in the way that I think some of those older generations think it might. You know, the fabric of the world is not going to fall apart if we just call out what existed in this movie. I think that's a big part of it, the fear of losing something from the past, as if that's not happening all the time. It's a very strange syndrome.

Laurin: Yeah. It was a disheartening conversation, but it did help me take stock of everything that I think is important. So, I thank my aunt for that. Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you would like to before we finish up?

Alilunas: I'll just reiterate... how fortunate I feel for the great mentorship that I've had, and the tremendous people that have come before me, that I've learned so much from, and that I value so much. How important I think it is to carry on those traditions for the people that come after us. The life cycle of academia is something I really value, and I want to play my role in it the same way that those who came before me played their role for me. I think that academia is overrun by very selfish, arrogant, egotistical, myopic people, who don't think about anything but themselves, and that couldn't be more opposite from how I [hope it can be],

which is a community of people working together and caring for each other, learning from each other. Constantly learning; that's the thing. There's so much to learn, always, from new people.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. The Department of Screen Arts & Cultures at the University of Michigan first offered the PhD degree in 2006; it was later renamed the Department of Film, Television, and Media, as described below. [return to page 1]
- 2. "Sex, Media, Reception: New Approaches" conference, February 14-15, 2014, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- 3. Peter Alilunas, "'Nothing I Ever Do is Ever Good Enough': Masculinities in the Films of Vince Vaughn," MA thesis (University of Texas at Austin, 2008). Part of this research was published in *Mediascape* in Spring 2008 as "Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure: The Frat Pack, Women, and the Trauma of Victimization in the 'Dude Flick.'":

https://web.archive.org/web/20080804040957/ http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08_MaleMasculinity.html

- 4. The course was "Sexualities and U.S. Film," Fall 2007, University of Texas at Austin.
- 5. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989: 246-248.
- 6. Projectorhead Film/Lecture Series, University of Michigan, March 11, 2010.
- 7. Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014.
- 8. Peter Alilunas, "'Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video, 1976-1986," PhD diss. (University of Michigan, 2013); Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016).
- 9. Whitney Strub, "The Clearly Obscene and the Queerly Obscene: Heteronormativity and Obscenity in Cold War Los Angeles," *American Quarterly* 60.2 (June 2008): 373-398.
- 10. Eric Schaefer, "The Problem with Sexploitation Movies," *Iluminace* 3 (2012): 148-152.
- 11. Mary Francis is now the Editorial Director at the University of Michigan Press.
- 12. eBay stopped selling adult materials on June 15, 2021, removing what was a vital marketplace for scholars. Daniella Genovese, "Ebay bans sales of adult-only items," Fox Business, June 15, 2021. https://www.foxbusiness.com/lifestyle/ebay-sexually-explicit-content-sales. [return to page 2]
- 13. https://kinseyinstitute.org/
- 14. https://www.alta-glamour.com/

- 15. https://vinegarsyndrome.com/; For a profile of Rubin, see Erik Piepenburg, "Smut, Refreshed for a New Generation," *New York Times*, January 26, 2014: AR14.
- 16. Peter Alilunas, "Going Up the Country: Adult Film History in Eugene, Oregon," in *Screening Sex: The Sex Scene*, ed. Darren Kerr and Donna Peberdy (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, forthcoming).
- 17. Eric Schaefer, "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A history of exploitation films, 1919-1959," PhD diss. (University of Texas, 1994). [return to page 3]
- 18. The planning meeting was held in Seattle, Washington in 2014, and the first official meeting of the SIG was in Montreal, Canada in 2015. https://www.cmstudies.org/general/custom.asp?page=groups_adultfilm
- 19. There was some brief and minor discussion among members as to whether or not "Adult Film History" would encompass the other kinds of work that scholars in the SIG were doing, as well the kinds of films.
- 20. "Media" was added to the organization's name in 2002; *Cinema Journal* was renamed *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* in 2018. https://www.cmstudies.org/page/org_history
- 21. The Department of Screen Arts and Cultures at the University of Michigan was renamed Film, Television, and Media in 2018.
- 22. Chuck Kleinhans, "The Change from Film to Video Pornography: Implications for Analysis," in *Pornography: Film and Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006): 154-167.
- 23. "What is Film? Change and Continuity in the 21st Century" conference, November 6-7, 2009. University of Oregon Turnbull Center, Portland, Oregon.
- 24. https://sds.utoronto.ca/sexual-representation-collection/
- 25. The Illustrated Presidential Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, ed. Earl Kemp (Greenleaf Classics, 1970).
- 26. Peter Alilunas, "From BBS to TGP: The Origins of Online Pornography," (presentation, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Seattle, Washington, March 13, 2019). [return to page 4]
- 27. "Porn and/as Pedagogy, Sexual Representation in the Classroom: A Curated Roundtable Discussion," edited by Kyler Chittick, *Synoptique* 9.2 (2021): 269-294.
- 28. Kevin John Bozelka, Peter Lehman, and Linda Williams, "An Interview with Alilunas Lehman and Linda Williams," *The Velvet Light Trap* 59.1 (2007): 62–68, https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2007.0001.
- 29. See, for example, Brian Steinberg, "Controversial Classics Spur New Conversations for TCM Hosts," *Variety*, March 2, 2021. https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/tcm-controversy-searchers-gone-with-the-wind-ben-mankiewicz-1234919088/
- 30. Discussed in an independent study on anti-pornography feminism with Gayle Rubin in 2009 at the University of Michigan.

SEX MEDIA RECEPTION new approaches

KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

FEBRUARY 14-15, 2014

Elena Gorfinkel (UW-Milwaukee)

2/14 5:15 pm NQ 2255 **Linda Williams**

(UC-Berkeley) 2/15 5:45 pm NQ 2255

FRIDAY 2/14

"Sites of Reception" 1:30 - 3:15 NQ 2435

"Sex in the City" 3:30 - 5 NQ 2435

SATURDAY 2/15

"Gay Male Counterpublics" 9:30 -11 NQ 2255

"Rethinking Mediated Pleasures" 9:30 -11 NQ 2435

Plenary Panel: "Archiving Sexuality" 11:15 -1 NQ 2435

"Sex and the Art Film" 2:15 - 3:45 NQ 2435

"Revisiting Pink" 2:15 - 3:45 NQ 2255 "Phenomenology of Digital Encounters" 4 - 5:30 NQ 2255

"Lust in the Archive" 4 - 5:30 NQ 2435

SCREENING: The Curious Female - 2/15 9:30 pm - Angell Hall AUD A

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



My mother, Sylvial Lewis Lesage was a New Yorker transplanted to a small Midwestern town. She spoke Yiddish till she went to school. She encouraged my intellectual life but she never accepted feminism.



Dixon Public Library, where I spent many an hour.

Interview with Julia Lesage: pornography in the house

by <u>Daniel Laurin</u> transcribed by Lo Humeniuk

Interview on the occasion of Chuck Kleinhans' pornography research collection's arrival at the <u>Sexual Representation Collection</u>, Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, University of Toronto. [March 18, 2021].

Daniel: Because this is an oral history interview and not like a podcast, I don't have to do any editing. So you can ramble as much as you like. I'm happy to be taken along on that journey. I sent you a list of questions and in between you sent me some other things. I enjoyed going through those files to sift out questions that had been answered elsewhere, but also the things you sent gave me a few more ideas to discuss. I would like to start with you just saying your name and where you are, and then we could talk a little bit about your personal and then educational history.

Julia: I'm Julia Lesage, living in Eugene, Oregon. I'm one of the three co-founders and the only living editor of *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Cinema*. I lived till college in Dixon, Illinois; that town also was the boyhood home of Ronald Reagan so you can get a little sense of what it was like. My mother was a Jewish woman from New York City who had been a high school teacher there. She met my father on a boat to Europe, married him, and moved to this little rural community where he was a physician. I was brought up both appreciating small town agricultural life and looking toward urban life beyond it, and also I experienced the effects of my parents' mixed religious marriage.[1] [open endnotes in new window] That helped make me who I am.

I went to Cornell as an undergraduate; I had planned to become a physician, but I wasn't very good in math or science. Then I got a Master of Arts for Teacher's degree from Indiana University and taught high school for five years. That job discouraged me. It's not much talked about, but high schools are actually oppressive to students, in both an administrative sense and in terms of the student experience. For example, a fellow teacher didn't like what a kid said in class, so he wrote on the student's permanent record: "This student has definite unAmerican tendencies." This happened in the early 60s.

Seeking an escape, I joined a Catholic volunteer organization and taught English as a foreign language in Lima, Peru. There I had extra time on my hands and joined a little film academy to learn 16 millimeter filmmaking. When I came home, I got a PhD at Indiana University. As I started that PhD in 71, I really liked the changes that had happened in the United States. I left because life was terribly boring, and I came back as the anti-war movement—the Vietnam anti-war movement—was going on. I very deliberately dropped down a generation, joined the anti-war movement, and got a degree in Comparative Literature with a



Our house was on the river, about a half mile up from here on the left hand bank



Chuck and Julia in graduate school

dissertation on Godard's films. So, that's my education.

Daniel: And how was Indiana for film? How was it in a comp lit program?

Julia: Well, there was film studies, you could do it scattered. In the comparative literature program, we had a category of study called "Literature and ----." You could study literature and the arts, literature and opera, literature and film, literature and psychoanalysis, or literature and history; and you could do a "Literature and" dissertation.

Generationally the 60s and 70s were a time of bullheaded independence, and I'm a bullheaded independent person. In graduate school I did a lot of my graduate courses as independent study. Later when I applied for a job at the University of Oregon, one of the senior faculty said at my interview, "We didn't know what your graduate study consisted of. You had a lot of good grades, but the courses were listed on your transcript as independent study. What were you doing there?" I much preferred using the library and doing my own research. At that time teachers wanted to place their class in a circle; then you'd hear a lot of student reports. I didn't have much respect for my fellow students. I thought, "I'd like to hear what the professor has to say. I really don't care what they say; they're just bullshitting." I would rather read than go to those kinds of classes. And then I met Chuck and had more reasons not to ... want to go to class.

Daniel: In some interviews, Chuck credits you with his interest in studying film. [2]

Julia: Right. Chuck was interested in theater. I not only was interested in film, but I had a Zen attitude towards purchasing books while Chuck always loved to purchase books. I was living in a dorm when we met—when he came in my dorm room, I had a shelf of books a yard and a half long. He asked, "What's that?" "It's my books," I said, "I always get to the library early and take out the course textbooks for a semester, and then if I really liked it good enough to read again, then I would go out and buy it after the course was over." I was absolutely crazy about that kind of minimalism.

Then I got a fellowship to travel in Europe and do research for my dissertation, and Chuck came along with me. That's when he realized he could do better at a lot of this than the people who were spouting film stuff. Because some of us in comp lit, we knew foreign languages... I knew Spanish pretty fluently, and I had a good reading knowledge and basic, you know, menu conversational French, and he had a basic menu conversational French, and knew a lot of Italian. That meant we were reading a lot of stuff in French before it hit the United States. For the comparative literature doctorate, you have to have three foreign languages—at that time at least.

When Chuck and I got together and probably all our life, we were intellectual snobs. We really knew more than most of the people we were with. I say that because that's partly how we carried off *Jump Cut* all those years. But it also meant that when Foucault hit the United States or Lacan hit the United States, even when a new version of Freud hit England, we'd been there already before those things were *au courant*. For example, when I was an undergraduate at Cornell, I was reading Freud in German. The result is that I am interested in lots of topics that my peers are interested in, but not with the enthusiasm for the things that they're enthusiastic about. In other words, I've already gone at these topics from a different direction.

I say that now because this attitude enters into our discussions today about my interests in sexual representation. And in particular, in sexuality as it relates to



In Paris for dissertation research on Godard.



A conventional marriage.

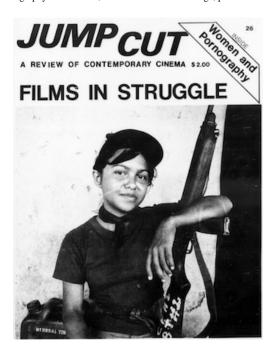
the women's movement, Second Wave feminism, which was going on at the time that we're discussing. One of the things I thought of when you said you wanted to talk about the early 80s is a very interesting development in the women's movement that culminated in the sex wars. Chuck and I were really enthusiastic about the sex wars. We thought, "It's been a long time coming." And I would add to that, given the primacy that gay marriage and trans issues have taken in later years, accompanied by the desire for social inclusion and respectability, we need another sex wars—desperately. Because this discussion of sexuality and sexual practice has almost dropped out, just at a time when many people are challenging the sexual imagination of gender completely. But many activists want respectability so much. They want visibility and recognition so much, they're *not* going to write about sex, and they're *not* going to talk about sex. I feel like "Oh, my God, why isn't anybody talking about sex?"

Now, I say that...my sex life has been relatively unspectacular, right. I'm traditionally female, cisgendered and was married to a man. Well, Chuck and I lived together for about 12 or 13 years before we got married. But all that time, from the time we first got together till he died, I was only with him. Not that I wasn't tempted, but I didn't want to be in a relationship where I had to explain things, and I think if you want to be polyamorous, you have to do a lot of explaining. If you don't want to do a lot of explaining, don't do it.

Daniel: I've never thought of monogamy as a way of not having to do all the negotiations and explaining but that's...

Julia: Absolutely. The principle of least complication—it's a very good principle to live by.

I just mentioned that because our lifestyle varied from our academic pursuits. Chuck had a tremendous intellectual interest in pornography. I have a tremendous intellectual interest in feminine masochism, which has dominated my intellectual work. And that topic or the role it played in my work had no recognition within the women's movement, because who the hell wanted to talk about feminine masochism—at a time when everybody's talking about empowerment? For me the topic is at the heart of considering women's oppression. Love and sexual attraction for the oppressor. And one of the issues that is not often come up in the trans writing that I read is what happens to this



I wrote a long list of questions that I had about pornography, 1981.



1977, staff editorial on need to support Gay Liberation.

masochism. For example, if a man becomes a woman, does the fact that he lives with all the shit that a woman lives with, does he become a masochist? Samuel Delany portrayed this in one of his novels, *Triton* (1976), when the protagonist becomes a woman and he can't understand why all of a sudden he's feeling bad.

Daniel: I only ever read *Time Square Red*. I've never read any... I've read parts of Delany's novels...

Julia: You're missing something. I couldn't recommend them high enough.

Anyway, at that because that particular moment in the women's movement, in the late 70s, and the early 80s, we ran articles on that had a critique of pornography on films such as *Not a Love Story* and *Dressed to Kill.* These essays were by pretty good writers making, you know, quite good points. However, by the time Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon came along, they seemed way too extreme and did not have either my support or Chuck's; in fact, I don't know that anybody working on *Jump Cut* ever supported them.

This time, the turn from the 70s to the 80s, was especially interesting in *Jump Cut* and among the film people I know. For example, I wrote this list of questions I had about pornography and published it in *Jump Cut* in 1981 as the introduction to a special section on Women and Pornography.[3] Before that, a group of women I knew in Chicago decided to get together to watch and discuss some pornography. This was the time that Candida Royalle had set out to make and distribute feminist pornography. Our group consisted of staff and faculty at Northwestern, and also Patricia Erens, Linda Williams, Gina Marchetti and some other *Jump Cut* women.

I also told Chuck I would be interested in going to pornographic movie theaters with him. But it clearly was not a hospitable space for women. Chuck and I could be sitting together and then some guy would move and sit next to me. Literally, physically—before the video cassette—if a woman wanted to go into a pornographic movie theater, she would be aggressed upon. Well, women are always aggressed upon in the streets. But it is the case that with the arrival of the video cassette, pornography literally put the cassettes in people's houses—I remember the statistic in 1984 that pornography had put the VCR in houses and the top ten videos that year were all porn.

At the same time we were writing about these things, *Jump Cut* had grown leery of the idea of positive images. We had an extensive Gay Men and Film special section in *Jump Cut* 16, 1977, with an editorial on the need to support gay liberation.[4] And about the same time, in 78 we had Richard Dyer's article, "Gays and Film,"[5] and in that same issue, we reprinted the introduction to *Positive Images* by Linda Artel and Susan Wengraf,[6] and we also had a review of that book, "There's more to a positive image than meets the eye," by Diane Waldman who critiques the whole idea that oppressed groups primarily need to seek out or create positive images of themselves and their group.[7] Then, in 1981, we had the "Lesbians in Film" special section.[8] I think that this moment in feminist and gay/lesbian writing is extremely important to think about, because it comes at a point when politically active feminists can open up to more complexity.

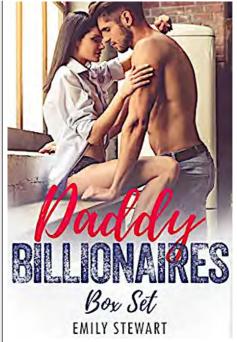
Introduction	Edith Becker		
	Michelle Citron Julia Lesage		
	B. Ruby Rich	17	
Filmography of Lesbian Works	Andrea Weiss, with help from Altermedia, Women Make Movies and Greta		
	Schiller	22	
Lesbian Vampires	Bonnie Zimmerman	23	
Lesbians in 'Nice' Films	Claudette Charboneau Lucy Winer	25	
The Films of Barbara Hammer	Jacquelyn Zita	26	
WOMEN I LOVE and DOUBLE STRENGTH (Barbara	PLACE WAY	20	
Hammer, 1976 and 1978)	Andrea Weiss	30	
The Films of Jan Oxenberg	Michelle Citron	31	
Hollywood Transformed	Judy Whitaker	33	
CELINE AND JULIE GO BOATING (Jacques Rivette, 1974)	Julia Lesage	36	
MAEDCHEN IN UNIFORM (Leontine Sagan, 1931)	B. Ruby Rich	44	

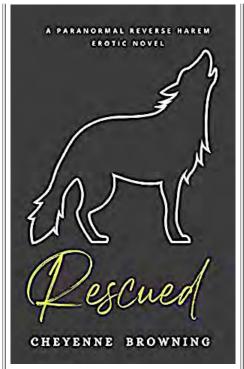
Table of contents of hallmark special section, 1981.

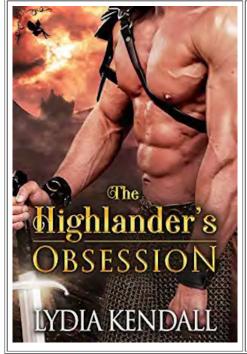
But that's a moment in time, okay—this is all a moment in time. So I'm quite fascinated to go back with you and look back at this 1981 piece I wrote, "Women and pornography." I wrote it in questions partly to deflect my own discomfort with a blanket condemnation of pornography, and particularly to deflect my discomfort with women not acknowledging women's masochistic fantasies. That denial still feels like the elephant in the room.

Let me explain. If gender oppression and sexual oppression go on in all countries, and across history, back to the caveman... It's about sex! Gender oppression is about sex! But it takes two. And most women are either hornswoggled or glued into heterosexuality. My thesis has always been this: if in all these cultures, men have more social power than women, then ordinary heterosexuality is a masochistic relationship for the woman. Now, almost two thirds or three fourths of the articles I have written in my professional career deal with this, one way or another. For years, Chuck and I were totally amazed the fact that I have this relatively large body of scholarship going over this theme using many kinds of approaches. But most who admire me as a feminist scholar cannot utter those words: feminine masochism.

So that's been my interest in the material we are talking about today. Not so much interest in video pornography, partly because I gave pornography a chance but I'm not that aroused by image material. In contrast, I'm fascinated, ethnographically, to see what all these naked women look like. Because aside from dressing in the gym locker room, I have not been able to see naked women *en masse* and so beaver shots are of interest. In contrast, as far as men and their genitalia, I come from a farming community. When I was a little girl, they told me that the turkey with the wattles was the male turkey, and then when I saw little boys' naked bodies, I thought they had wattles too. Wattles are not that attractive. I still think that.







As with pornography videotapes and DVDs, erotic novels for women depend on the "cover" to appeal immediately to the reaer/viewer's sexual preference, even if only published electronically. Notice how some of the covers combine appeals to a variety of sexual interests, marketed then to several potential customer search terms. I found the highlander trope unusual, but it follows on the immense popularity and commercial success of Diana Gabaldon's book series and then television series, *Outlander*.

I'm fascinated with many aspects of pornography. I'm particularly interested in fantasy—bread-and-butter masochistic fantasies, fantasy material that has now come to be part of romance fiction and some of science fiction, and lots of shapeshifter fiction. Furthermore, aspects of that fiction are related to social reality in complex ways. For example, a lot of the romance novels feature an alpha male. It could be in the werewolf community, it could be the wolf pack male, it could be the billionaire or it could be the Highlander/Outlander. Furthermore, there came a point—and this is much later, probably in the last 20 years—where romance fiction became sexual fiction.

Amazon used to have what they called community group forums. I loved them. In them, you could find fans' sexual discourse about sexually oriented fiction. A lot of women participated in these discussions. And I would follow the ones on the main genre which I then enjoyed: ménage. [I had known it as ménage à trois before

finding this search term.]

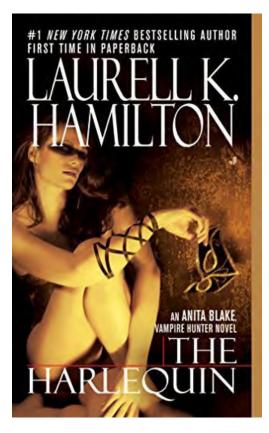
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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Paranormal, shapeshifting, sexual.

By the way, early in my career, I decided that I would preserve fiction from scholarly pursuit, not just trash fiction, but pleasure reading that I would never write about, since I had to maintain some escapes for myself away from professional life. So I'm very well-read in science fiction, and certain genres of shapeshifter, paranormal, ménage romance erotic fiction.

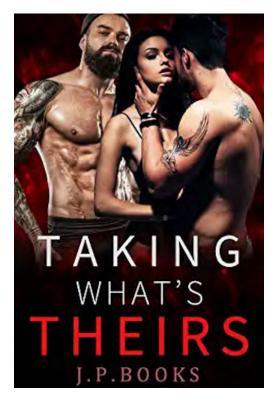
Anyway. I used to read the Amazon community group forum for ménage. Ménage fandom was interesting in the way the women wrote about their preferences. I liked the idea of three because the books mix gender combinations up—two men, two women, three, something different in each mixture. And I also liked the narrative switches of who gets to be the meat in the middle of the sandwich? Who gets to have things done to them? The women writing in the forum would note perhaps that a book was MFM, meaning there were two men and a woman in the middle. Well, some writers to the forum were very picky about how they wanted those three letters to be arranged, and which three letters they wanted. The comments would contain disputes about the arrangement of letters or who would do what to whom...and then other people would say, "Are you crazy, it's really nice this way!" I absolutely love that kind of discussion. To some degree it reflected homophobia about two women or two men together sexually, but such ideas were gently refuted by others. It was interesting to me how much enthusiasm the women had in following that fan forum. And, I say "women" because I don't remember any male names being used, although participants could use a pseudonym.

And then came the huge readership for all of the *Shades of Grey* books; not that I was interested in reading them, because I like to read a book with good prose.

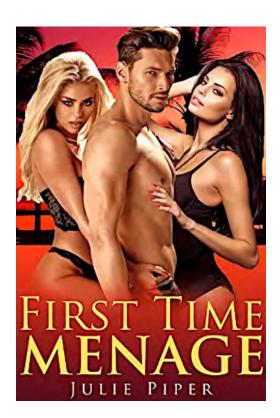
Daniel: I listened to one of them as an audiobook, and I had to stop.

Julia: Well, the best critiques I read of *Fifty Shades of Grey* dwelt on the implications of the alpha male's attractiveness and what the alpha male can command. Sexual fantasy life around alpha males is perhaps an index of how active patriarchy really is. And again, you know, such analyses could open up to new vistas in the trans era: Will the appeal of the alpha male will diminish now? Or does it stay, in new guises—who knows? I have a suspicion that this is not an area that people are enthusiastic about exploring in public. Sexual dominance is not discussed a lot. Fantasy life is not discussed a lot anymore. And I want to continue that discussion since fantasy is and is not social reality, mostly not.

Going back to that time we were talking about, there were some crucial books for me and most of the feminist scholars of my era. We were taking an analytic look at women's daily lives, especially in the family. In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979) Nancy Chodorow explained how women take charge of domestic space. [9] [open endnotes in new window] And in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* Dorothy Dinnerstein analyzes male and female gender roles from a different perspective. [10] I've always been interested in in space and the organization of space, because I think part of the issues around sexuality, and why men and women might understand these roles and proceed somewhat differently is that women have been socialized into setting the scene, sort of stage managing. And one of the things I discovered in in the pornography that I looked at are the looking privileges that men have and different imaginative uses of the body. Perhaps now things have changed historically, especially with more men doing child rearing.



Menage: MFM



Menage: FMF

Oh God, I haven't even told you about trying to teach pornography—what a disaster. I was at a visiting gig at San Francisco State. I thought I set it up very well: I had a guy who was going to lead an all-male discussion, and I was going to show pornography to the women. In my group I showed a heterosexual porn movie, I can't remember what it was. Then I showed *Boys in the Sand*, and the first point where we saw a close-up of the distended anus after lovemaking, somebody was just ready to vomit and I had to stop the whole thing, and....

Daniel: I read that somewhere. What you wrote was that the close-up of the anus caused such a collective freak out that you had to stop the film and kind of smooth feathers mid-film. I was wondering... was someone feeling sick?

Julia: Not someone getting physically sick. It was like, "Aaaaah! I'm gonna leave, I can't stand this, this is terrible!" Enough discomfort to stop the film. I don't know if the person was going to get physically sick, but they were certainly red and flustered and could have passed out. Let's put it that way.

Daniel: What year was this? Approximately?

Julia: That was 84.

Julia: What surprised me when I went back to reading the questions I had about pornography in 1981was how few of them have been answered. In other words, those questions all still stand.

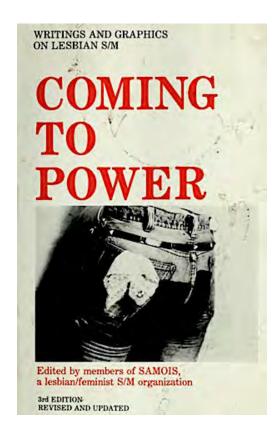
Daniel: Reading those questions, ... it feels like you laid out what pornography studies is doing right now. It's all the questions that people are still asking.

Julia: Those questions also laid out my own path in many ways—to examine how images and sexual fantasy are connected with social and economic reality.

Going back to what is fascinating about the romance novel, an immense amount of time is spent describing clothes, social circumstance, and the place where someone is located. Sometimes food, lots about food. In contrast, in the mainstream pornography that I would see—and Chuck describes this in this discussion of fetish images—is that the photographer or the cinematographer carves out a section of the event, which is sexual activity. Whereas a woman who has been raised to be a wife is not going to think that way. It's like in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, she's going to buy a steak. So I quickly became interested in video pornography as the staging of it in the home as theater. In other words,



The woman is the backstage manager for everything in the family—the theme of a lot of women's fiction. In erotica marketed to women, the woman is often out of control.



I was in a women's reading group that discussed this.

we're going to have a date night, and so we'll have a porn film, and you can dress up in your nice lingerie, and we'll have wine... And I've had women friends tell me that when they want a date night, they say, "Let's, you know, the kids are gone, we can put on a tape or something." But what they're really saying is, "We can spend the evening having sex," but if they just say it that way, they might not get a response. But if they say it: "Let's watch a tape together, and I'll put on my fancy underwear," then it becomes something they feel the husband is more likely to accede to. Behind the scenes, of course. Women have learned to do that with all family members.

Daniel: What, trick them?

Julia: Well, it's not exactly tricking them. It's arranging things so that people are happy and don't fight.

Daniel: Yes, tricking isn't the right word. It's more like presenting the situation in a way that is made more appealing to them so that everyone is happy.

Julia: That's right. And they have to do this, with all the jobs that are available for women, by the way: nurse, schoolteacher, housekeeper, secretary. Same traits in any of those jobs.

Daniel: Before issue 26 and your article, "Women and Pornography," you had a transcript of a conversation on the topic that happened before that, right? There was a group discussion at a conference on feminist film criticism.

Julia: At Northwestern, at the Lolita Raclin Memorial Conference in Feminist Film Criticism in 1980.

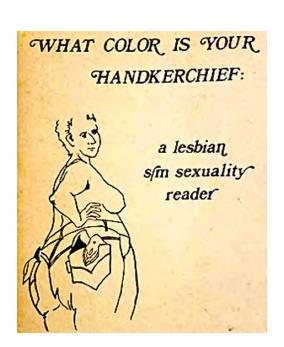
Daniel: Yes. And there was a transcript, an anonymized transcript, and that never got published in *Jump Cut*. It just kind of got circulated.[11] Do you remember why...? What the resistance was to publishing even an anonymized version?

Julia: Some of the *Jump Cut* editors did not want us to publish it. Chuck and I did an InstantPrint run of about 4,000 copies and distributed it at conferences such as Society for Cinema Studies and MLA.

Daniel: What was the nature of their resistance? What were they objecting to?

Julia: Oh, God, we didn't even talk about it yet—*Samois*. Samois comes into existence. Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin are very articulate about lesbian sadomasochism as a consensual practice.[12] Chuck was a friend of Gayle Rubin's in Ann Arbor before she moved out to California and so they have an old friendship. I think that lesbian sadomasochism really hit the lesbian community hard. And I think a lot of feminists then had to come to terms with something very new and perhaps distasteful to them. I'm not saying anybody has to practice anything, but every so often when you believe something very strongly, someone comes along and says, "Oh, I'm gonna do it very differently." It takes some getting used to.

In addition, many academics and filmmakers who were lesbians were open among people who know them but not professionally. I had arguments with some of them about curriculum in Women's Studies. I, who taught Women's Studies and was heterosexual, always said that a women's studies course is incomplete if it doesn't deal with lesbians in terms of lifestyle, intellectual life, art, and feminist theory. And I also always did that in every one of my many public lectures on Women and Film. I remember, in 1980, I was lecturing on that topic in Pittsburgh, and one of the conference organizers comes up to me afterward and said, "Julia, all the dykes in the audience think you're a dyke." I replied, "What a



A Samois pulblication.

nice thing for them to think about me." She was sort of surprised, and I explained, "If I'm asked to give a public lecture on women's issues and don't discuss lesbian art, lesbian cinema, you know, lesbian audiences... what is it? What am I doing?" It's just not right...it's intellectually dishonest." But I also had heterosexual privilege. In addition, I had white married woman's privilege which is a hell of a lot of protection.

	HANDKERCHIEF COLOR CODE FOR	LESBIANS
Color	Left Side	Right Side
Red Dark Blue Light Blue Robins Egg Blue Mustard Orange Yellow Green Olive Drab	Fist-fucker Anal sex, top Oral sex, top Light S/M, top Food fetish, top Anything goes, top Gives golden showers Hustler, selling Uniforms/military, top	Fist-fuckee Anal sex, bottom Oral sex, bottom Light S/M, bottom Food fetish, bottom Anything goes, bottom Wants golden showers Hustler, buying Uniforms, military/bottom Novice (or virgin)
White White Lace Gray Brown Black Purple Maroon Lavender	Likes novices, chicken- hawk Victorian scenes, top Does bondage Shit scenes, top Top, heavy S/M and whipping Piercer Likes menstruating women Group sex, top Breast fondler	Victorian scenes, bottom Wants to be put in bondage Shit scenes, bottom Bottom, heavy S/M and whipping Piercee Is menstruating Group sex, bottom Breast fondlee

From What Color is Your Handkerchief?

Daniel: How was it different putting together issue 30 in 1985? The sexual representation sections? because that was—

Julia: It was dominated by Tom Waugh's amazing article: "Men's pornography, gay vs. straight." [13] That's such a monumental piece of scholarship, and monumental amount of observation. A publication rarely gets a piece that's that comprehensive and important. Did Tom tell you the story about the multiple Xeroxes. I photocopied the sexual images he sent over and over trying to degrade them.

Daniel: Yeah. Can you tell me your reasoning for the multiple photocopying? Because he told me what he believes your reasoning was--

Julia: I didn't want it to go through the mail.

Daniel: Ah. Yeah.

Julia: But also Tom and I had a big discussion I think about gay sex and public sex. I said, "Tom, I can hardly think about this without thinking about how dangerous public space can be for women. And it's dangerous for trans women. It's a dangerous place. So, even clandestine public sex in the gay ghetto is still a certain kind of male privilege about public space."

Daniel: Absolutely.

Julia: He understood that. His analysis of *LOADS* is an important part of that



essay. LOADS really is about man's culture.

There are very few pieces we've gotten in *Jump Cut* that have been that significant. The scope of it is so extraordinary.

Daniel: He doesn't think it's been cited enough..

Julia: Good, it hasn't been.



When Mr. Marks agrees to help Billy, one of his freshman atudents, with some extra tutoring, he has no idea that he's the one who's going to be learning new tricks! However, Billy knows what he wants and gets it, sucking down Mr. Marks' hug cock with a fearned skill that soon has the teacher on his knees returning the favor. It's a cram course and Mr. Marks passes with tlying colors in a buttfucking final, popping a creamy load all over Billy's upturned ass-cheeks!

I made multiple photocopies to degrade an image In Tom Waugh's essay so the issue could go through the U.S. mail. Cllick on the image to see the whole image.

Daniel: What were the issues when you were moving *Jump Cut* online?

Julia: We did a trial, run maybe five years earlier. We had an editorial discussing it in issue 40, 1996—"*Jump Cut* online, sort of."[14] We had a trial discussion over the phone and by mail with a lot of our writers and they all said, "Oh no, no, don't do that; we love paper." Paper is very expensive and it's really hard to store and it just isn't worth it. I mean my expenses are so cheap now, the website itself costs me \$100 a month, and for years it was \$50. Ridiculously cheap. And no back issues to drag around whenever we move. We had wanted to go electronic before people wanted us to do it, and then we finally just said, "Oh shit, with all these expenses, we can't do it anymore." Well, we could've done it. We didn't want to.

And then there were problems with computers we never talked about publicly, the ephemerality of software and the vagaries of computer affordances. For example,

The gay-for-pay gaze in gay male pornography

by Kevin John Bozelka

Warning

Example of opening page for our online articles with explicit sexual images, asking readers to affirm that they are over 18. It protects *Jump Cut* from bots and hopefully potential government censorship.



Co-editor John Hess. The editors decided early on what constituted "fair use" of images and what would be appropriate.

I don't know how many versions of Dreamweaver I've gone through, but it used to be very fragile. If you didn't save every keystroke—save, keystroke, save— you would crash, your computer would crash, and you'd have start over; you'd lose five hours' worth of work. It was awful.

Daniel: I was thinking specifically about that issue with the images and Tom's essay. When you moved online, were you able to do sexually explicit images?

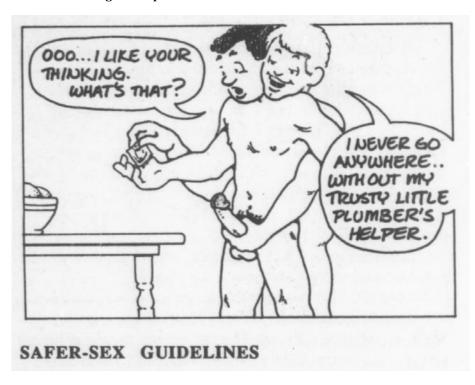
Julia: Yes. Look up Jon Lewis's article, "Real sex: aesthetics and economics of arthouse porn," or Kevin Bozelka's "The gay-for-pay gaze in gay male pornography." [15] If the article has explicitly sexual images, you have to click an opening page and affirm, "I am over age 18," to get into the version with pictures. Otherwise you are taken to the text-only page. The way censorship works online is by bots; the bots crawl and if they can get into sexual images, they censor that piece. It's all automated. But if you check off images like, how many stoplights are in this image, then the bots don't get any further. So I paid a friend who's a tech person to set JavaScript up for us for articles with sexually explicit images.

Daniel: But did you have discussions when you first started putting things online, if you *could* use images like that? I'm not talking about a kind of a tech solution to censoring pages but a discussion of whether you *could* or should put those images on a website that was accessible to all.

Julia: I don't think any of us ever worried about it. By that time, there were only Chuck and John Hess and me. We just did what we wanted.

Earlier though, in one long print issue, we put up safe sex guidelines during the AIDS crisis. And one of our authors had sent the issue with his article in it to his family. His mom really objected, because apart from her son's essay were also safe sex guidelines. That article had a lot of drawn images, and also a lot of discussion of practices that the parents didn't think about very much and they didn't like to be reminded that such practices existed.

Daniel: Are those images all up now?



One of our author's moms saw this and was upset. All the old *Jump Cut* print issues, with images are now up on archive.org, such as this essay on "Safer-Sex

Guidlines" by Jan Grover, 1988. https://archive.org/details/sim_jumpcut 1988 33/page/118/mode/1up

Julia: No, in the electronic version of print *Jump Cut*, I only put up the text, I didn't put up the images. That reminds me, I wanted to ask you about that, how the hell did you get Chuck's porn research collection through customs?

[Addendum: In 2021, Internet Archive (archive.org) put up all the print issues in their original format, images included.]

Daniel: That wasn't me. I was going to ask you. I don't know how-

Julia: I would never have sent these myself. I mean, Ontario had the worst censorship I ever heard of.

Daniel: Yes we did.

Julia: They still do?

Daniel: No, no, but that's recent. I'm pretty sure that the sale of pornography in Ontario was something that was illegal until the 1990s. Something like that.[16]

Julia: Well, when I heard you guys were going to bring a van down to Eugene, I thought, I hope they have some kind of fool-proof way of getting these boxes through Canadian customs because I surely wouldn't know what to do with it.

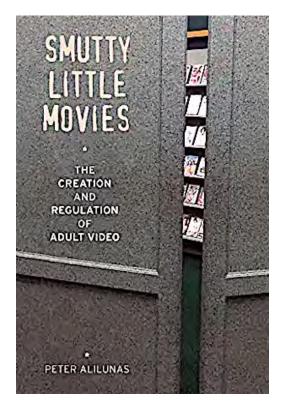
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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Peter Alilunas describes how pornographic VHS tapes put the VCR in U.S. living rooms. He also shepherded Chuck Kleinhans' porn research collection to the Bonham Center.

Daniel: I'm talking to Peter Alilunas, next week, so maybe I'll ask him about the specifics. But I unpacked it all. It was fun to go through. How were the boxes put together? Were they moved from another place?

Julia: Chuck was such a packrat. I have a hard drive of what he had on his computer; he had a lot of porn on it, I just copied it all over. I wouldn't have gone after his things so quickly after he died, but I needed two pieces of picture I.D. to get a lot of legal work done and I couldn't find his passport. The floors in his study and library were all cluttered and underneath the boxes and papers were vermin. There were books and papers everywhere, and I threw out a lot of stuff which I probably shouldn't have thrown out—I just needed to clear a path through. Later I had a declutterer and also friends helped me declutter. I finally got a young scholar here, Jenée Wilde, to help me go through Chuck's distilled scholarly research and teaching papers and we further organized them; she curated them and analyzed what's in each box; I haven't tried to get those settled, there're still 60 boxes. This is after everything. I haven't even tried to get those settled in a library because of COVID. [addendum: The papers were moved to the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research in 2021, thanks to Eric Hoyt.]

Daniel: Right.

Julia: Oh my word. I haven't gone through all his photos... I had 2000 slides digitized of his and my snapshots. I did have a nice collection of sexually explicit Polaroids. When Polaroid did 35 millimeter slides, he shot... oh such stuff he shot, otherwise I'd have donated that to you under a time lapse, but those are images I wouldn't have sent through the mail. In any case, the Polaroids deteriorated too much to save.

In terms of the pornography collection, shortly after Chuck died, I gave a bunch of boxes to Peter Alilunas who arranged all this to be set up with the Bonham Centre. I was really glad that he could do that. Peter went through the boxes and he said Chuck had a very good collection of videos, which I didn't know about.

In fact, Chuck and I each went our merry ways about pornography. It's very funny, the way it happened. He was more interested in visual imagery than I was, and we had a relationship in which we weren't too curious about what the other was doing; if they didn't talk about it, then they didn't feel like talking about it, and that was good enough. So I would every so often talk about stuff I was reading that interested me. I liked science fiction where people had telepathy, and they shared what each other was thinking, and I liked erotic stuff like that—where characters said or thought, "I could sense your orgasm." Chuck thought that possibility was disgusting. If I said I was into the paranormal, or shapeshifter fantasy, it made no sense to him. And that this fantasty could be also erotic would make even less sense to him. I think he liked to look at a good layout of a gal lying on her back showing him all her parts. That was fine with me, I had no objections to that. So we sort of stopped talking about such details. I mean, he told me about all the articles he was writing and all the research he was doing, but I think he explored pornography way beyond that.

And then something would come up and I'd say, "Oh yeah, once again, they're not paying attention to female masochism." He would be very sympathetic with me because he really agreed with my thesis that there's got to be something on the



Graduate students at Indiana University were aware of the Kinsey Center for Sexual Research. Visiting lecturers were often given a tour there.



Our garage reconverted into Chuck's library with stacks.

woman's part that's keeping the sex glue together to keep the oppression going.

So, he collected lots of stuff, and I wasn't paying attention to it. Oh, once when I was starting to teach in Oregon in the late 70s, I came home to Chicago and found a lot of big stack of pornography under the bed. Chuck was embarrassed because he thought I was going to criticize the hidden magazines from a feminist viewpoint and he said, "Oh, what am I supposed to do when you're gone so much?" I was so moved by his fidelity, that was fine.

Did Tom Waugh tell you about Chuck going to the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research and seriously getting into porn studies.

Daniel: Yeah.

Julia: That was when the boys still ran it, before that funny woman who had everything in pink. I can't remember what her name was. You know, the woman who ran it for many years. She wore pink and she had her office decorated in pink. [17] [open endnotes in new window]

Daniel: I didn't know that part.

Julia: So anyways, the boys were still running it, and when Chuck got there, they showed him around, "Oh, we have this, we have that." And then they said, "We have this" and showed him the photo collection of fetish high-heeled shoes. That collection only had about eight or ten boxes—banker's boxes of photographs — rather than, you know 500 boxes of photographs, which led Chuck to say, "I'll do that shoe thing because I think I can look through those boxes in the time that I have here." I think we had three or four days that we were going to be staying in Bloomington. So he chose high-heeled shoes to focus on because that was the size of the collection. Later he did a bunch of talks and slide show on it called "Stepping Out," and taught it. I don't know that he ever wrote it up in a published piece. You probably have a lot of things related to "Stepping Out." The Kinsey let him Xerox a lot of photographs.

The main thing that he got out of that research was—and it was actually very interesting to me, and I loved to hear him talk about it—to observe the way the photographs were composed and framed. A fetish photographer might set the woman up in front of a background and light it, but he would not care if the rest of the apartment were showing in the framing, because for the photographer, just capturing an image of this model wearing the shoes was enough. Or the same thing: she would pose outside next to their car and it would look like a family

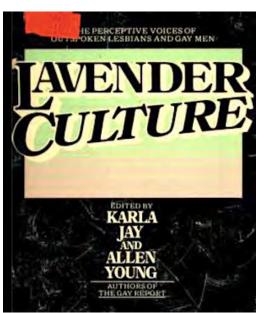


I read fiction. Chuck read and collected books in the profession, all his life.



Chuck's porn research collection at Sexual Representation Collection, before unpacking.

Books that influenced my thinking, especially about sexuality.



1971.

picture of wife next to car. But it was obvious the fetish shoes were on her feet. So Chuck was fascinated by this kind of amateur photography aesthetic. It showed the photographer was mainly interested in the fetish material, not traditional photographic composition.

Daniel: Everything was already located in his office in Eugene? In your home?

Julia: Chuck had several thousand books. More boxes than you know what to do with. Clippings. Art press, radical press, runs of things. He was a photographer, all kinds of photographic stuff. Every time we would move, we would have to find places to put all this stuff. Attics, basements, garages... Oh god. What a burden throughout my life. When we were in a commuting relation, which we did for 12, 13 years, I would visit him in Chicago. My goal was sometimes to just get him to clear a path from the front door through the living room so I could get to the bedroom and kitchen.

Daniel: He managed to move all of that to Eugene?

Julia: We managed to move all of it several times. To get him to leave his job at Northwestern and move to Eugene, I had an extension built on this house. We're sitting in that study now, this nice room with skylights. On the other side is what was the old garage that I had it redone as a library with stacks.

Anyway, you got a sense of how messy—not messy, packratty—he was.

Daniel: I was trying to understand if things were already in boxes because of a move, or if you had to pack all this stuff and go through it when you were packing it.

Julia: No, it was all in boxes. He had to use a moving van each time we had to live someplace new. I didn't go through the boxes. I gave them to Peter Alilunas after Chuck's death. I didn't know you'd take them. I mean I didn't know about the Bonham Centre at all. Peter arranged all that. And even Peter said he couldn't take any more to his garage, so when it became clear you were going to send a van, Peter came over to my house and got the rest.

Daniel: So he'd already taken some already?

Julia: Oh yeah. He'd taken, oh lord, 20? I don't know, how many boxes do you have—20 or 30?

Daniel: I think it is 28.

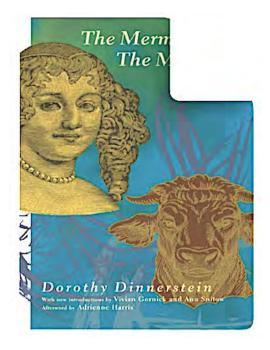
Julia: Yeah, so he probably took two thirds of them home right away, and then came back and got the other third.

Daniel: Wow. So then they were in his garage for a while as well.

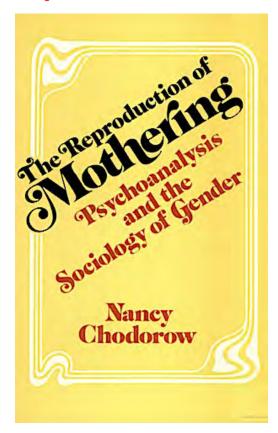
Julia: Not very long. Maybe, seven or eight months. But they have been in arduous conditions from whenever Chuck had packed them up originally.

Daniel: They would have just been still in boxes from a previous move?

Julia: Some of them would have been in a storage bin; not the videotapes, Chuck wouldn't have put videotapes in a storage bin. Here in this house, I still have 60 boxes of his stuff that I have had curated and condensed, and the vermin taken out of.



The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise, 1976



1978

Daniel: When you say vermin...

Julia: Little maggots, probably from candy that'd fallen on the floor.

Daniel: So what's happening with those boxes?

Julia: I don't have any plans for them. I'd be glad to find a home for them. Chuck was such a polymath. There were so many things he was interested in: the avant garde, he's got tons of stuff on the avant garde. Tons of stuff on political theory, and teaching political theory, and... and he was really... one of the pioneer teachers of film theory. Film and cultural theory. Yeah, his papers are really precious. I showed it to the library here but, you know, the house was in a messier stage and I think the librarians were appalled. So I hired Jené Wilde to go through them with me and we just went through, box by box, paper by paper, and organized it all. And then she wrote the catalog for each box.

Daniel: Wow.

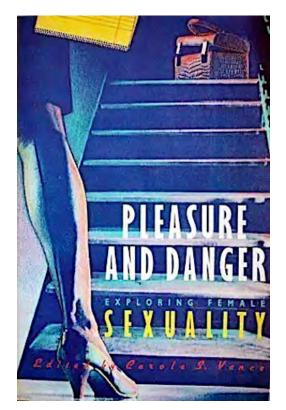
Julia: I could send you a copy of the catalog if you want.

Daniel: Yeah. That'd be great.

Julia: Oh, I know another thing I wanted to discuss with you. A book that just captured that cusp of a moment before the sex wars and turning from antipornography or conservative views of sexuality to more complex ones was Lavender Culture edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young (1971).[18] Chuck and I were both very much influenced by that book. The chapter on S/M has contrasting views from people who are interested in it as a phenomenon (or participate in it, they don't necessarily say) and also people who assert that S/M is an expression of patriarchy even for those who practice it. I copied that essay out today and made a PDF of it, so I'll send that to you, but I would really recommend that you read Lavender Culture, because it's such a pivotal book. I think for me this exemplifies a stage that has to occur in any movement for social change. At one point people get together and overlook their differences because they're working together for the empowerment of everybody in the group. But at another point people say, "Listen, you're really not paying attention to who I am and what I want." And I think that's what was always so fascinating for me about the sex wars: they really brought out into the open that kind of discussion. I think that the trans movement, with all the very sophisticated people writing within the trans movement now, have done that now about gender—they're really opening it up. But I think there's lots of things that the gender theorists still can't discuss, like corporate medicine and Big Pharma. Someday somebody's just going to have say "Look, you know, it's like a junkie. You're hooked on the man."

Daniel: In reading the 1981 issue of *Jump Cut*, and your essay on "Women and Pornography," but also that other discussion that you and Chuck circulated, I think it gave me a perspective on the sex wars—speaking as someone who has only learned about it through reading about it quite a while after the fact—that gets forgotten about in shorter retellings of it. Because we kind of get the idea that feminism splits into two camps, and that each camp gets more solid and more extreme. But the lead-up to that moment is missing in in things that I've read. So it was really wonderful to read your material and to see the moments before this and not such a split. That was really interesting for me, and made me realize that I'd not been teaching the sex wars very well.

Julia: That was an interesting period of time. *Jump Cut's* moving from an antipornography position to a pro-pornography position is very useful to trace. And I had not really looked at the steps whereby it happened. Chuck and I, by the way, became much more deliberate about moving into the trans era about six or seven



Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, ed. Carole Vance, 1984. The book comes out of the Sex Wars.

years ago. I was at a conference where an undergraduate speaking about her LGBT support group said they started the first meeting each term by having everybody tell what pronoun they were. After that I went home and said, "Chuck, we're going to have to re-do all of our knowledge of feminism." "What do you mean?" "Well," I said, "if you go to a meeting and everybody asks you what pronoun you are, and it's a gender meeting, what does that mean to you?" He said, "I don't know." I said "Alright, I guess we've got to get to work." I think we were very deliberate at that point about retooling our feminism. We found trans scholars very useful. But I still think everybody's scared to talk about sex.

Daniel: I wanted to mention this earlier when we were talking about the sex wars. There's a resurgence, even in this past year, of anti-pornography movements, and lots of funding going into getting teens to be anti-porn. And the *New York Times* ran an opinion piece about Pornhub and child trafficking. It's all directed at the idea that porn shouldn't be around and shouldn't be on the Internet. And even just this week, peoples' responses to the <u>women who were killed in the massage parlours</u> was that banning pornography is the solution. So. It's a very interesting time right now again for doing porn and thinking about porn.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. I went to Catholic grade school. The Jewish side of my family has been traced in a family history starting with my grandfather, Jacob Lewis, done by a distant cousin, Morris Lewis. See https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ua3s0r_G0-dFGFUI05IzH7X3WjJcWrsr/view. [return to page 1]
- 2. Chuck did his dissertation on a theory of farce, drawing on 19th century French plays. He discusses his entry into film studies extensively in an interview with Brian Winston, "'Just do it.' Chuck Kleinhans speaks," *Jump Cut*, no. 59, 2019: http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc59.2019/BrianWinston-Chuck/index.html.
- 3. Jump Cut 26, December 1981 https://archive.org/details/sim_jump-cut_1981-12_26/page/45/mode/2up
 The print issues of Jump Cut have been replicated on the Internet Archive: https://archive.org/details/pub_jump-cut. Text versions of the essays and PDFs of all the Jump Cut issues, along with many other research materials and essays and videos by Julia Lesage and Chuck Kleinhans are in the Jump Cut, Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage Collection: https://archive.org/details/jump-cut-magazine
- 4. https://archive.org/details/sim_jump-cut_1977-11_16
- 5. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/J C18folder/GaysinFilmDyer.html
- 6. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/ JC18folder/ArtelWengraf.html
- 7. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/ JC18folder/WaldmanVSPosImages.html
- 8. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC24-25folder/LesbiansAndFilm.html
- 9. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. [return to page 2]
- 10. The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise, 1976. Read: https://archive.org/details/mermaidminotaurs00dinn
- 11. "Women Discuss Porn," 1980. PDF available: https://ia803109.us.archive.org/32/items/20191012_20191012_2029/Women%20Discuss%20Porn.%201980.pdf

The story of how Chuck and I distributed this ourselves is told in an interview with Rox Samer, "The History of *Jump Cut*: 2013 Interview with Julia Lesage and Chuck Kleinhans, *Jump Cut* 60, 2021.

- 12. *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, edited by members of Samois, a lesbian/feminist S/M organization, 1981. Read: https://archive.org/details/comingtopowerwri00samo
- 13. "Men's Pornograpy: Gay vs Straight." *Jump Cut*, no. 30 1985. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC30folder/PornWaugh.html Article with images: https://archive.org/details/sim_jumpcut_1985_30/page/30/mode/1up

Thomas Waugh's pornography research collection is also at the Bonham Center and he has done an oral history there. It is in this issue of *Jump Cut*, along with one with Peter Alilunas.

- 14. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC40folder/JC40-E-JC.earlythoughts.html
- 15. Jon Lewis, "Real sex: aesthetics and economics of art-house porn," *Jump Cut* no. 51, 2009. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/ LewisRealsex/index.html :

Kevin John Bozelka, "The gay-for-pay gaze in gay male pornography," *Jump Cut* no 55, 2013: http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/BozelkaGayForPay/

16. The importing, sale, and exhibition of pornography has always been governed by national obscenity laws, which prohibited works that contained "undue exploitation of sex." The first constitutional challenge to obscenity law came with the Supreme Court of Canada case R v Butler [1992] 1 S.C.R. 452. The Butler decision brought about new categorizations of sexually explicit materials that theoretically allowed for explicit sex to not meet the definition of obscenity in the Criminal Code; these categories are "explicit sex with violence," "explicit sex without violence but which subjects people to treatment that is dehumanizing or degrading," and "explicit sex without violence that is neither degrading nor dehumanizing." This third category was considered not obscene unless it employed children. While this ruling created the framework for legal for depictions of explicit sex, it also created a situation where lesbian and gay materials, especially those that also featured s/m subcultures and practices, were targeted. See Brenda. Cossman et al., Bad Attitude/s on Trial: Pornography, Feminism, and the Butler Decision, Canada 150 Collection (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

17. June Reinisch [return to page 3]

18. "*Lavender Culture*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young, 1971. Read at https://archive.org/details/lavenderculture00jayk/mode/2up

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Tom Waugh Confessions of a "Sexpert"

by <u>Daniel Laurin</u> transcribed by Camille Intson

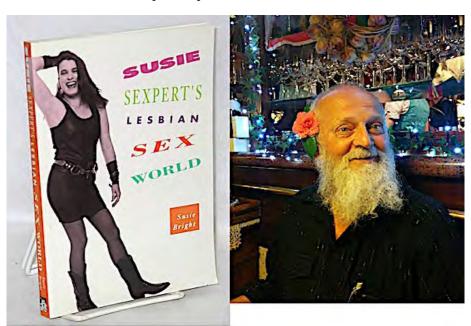
Interview on the occasion of the donation of Thomas Waugh's archives to the <u>Sexual Representation Collection</u>, Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, University of Toronto. February 18, 2021, finalized 2022. <u>Thomas Waugh</u> bio.

Daniel: I'd like to go through this starting with a kind of personal history, then talk about your educational history—then the section I'm calling a kind of personal porn history, personal relation to porn. Then think about teaching porn, your role as an expert. I actually have "sexpert" with the "S" in brackets which feels very 1990s.

Tom: Susie Bright was a "sexpert!"

Daniel: Who's Susie Bright?

Tom: She's the radical lesbian porn superstar of the 90s.



Sexpert. Susie Bright, 1990; Thomas Waugh, 2016.

Daniel: And then about porn archives: What was your experience working in porn archives. Then talk about what's coming here to the University of Toronto Sexual Representation Collection from you. You're in Montreal right now, correct? How

is the weather there right now?

Tom: It was minus 15 last night. We've had lots of snow; it's quite crunchy and cold and nice. I go out every day for a walk. The good news is that the pools are reopening next Friday, so I'll be able to resume my daily swimming schedule. And I hope that means the Bain Colonial will also reopen...



The interviewee (foreground, centre), extra and co-scriptwriter in fiction short about gay coming of age and intergenerational community pedagogy, shot in local Russian-Turkish-Jewish steambath: *Steam is Steam* (Étienne Desrosiers, 2010).

Daniel: (laughs) We need a steam! Everything is still very much closed here so this is a homemade haircut. My boyfriend did it and then I fixed it. I think we're a good team.

Let's start with a bit of personal history. Where did you grow up?

Tom: I was born in London, Ontario in 1948. My father was a United Church of Canada minister and he moved the family around Ontario every six or seven years, so I went to high school in Guelph, Ontario, and then I went to Western—now Western University—from 1966 to 1970, doing an Honours B.A. in English Language and Literature. And I basically hated it. I felt that I was missing the entire decade of the 60s, being in the most conservative university, the most conservative town in Canada. I escaped after that—the impulse would have been to just go on to grad school unquestioningly.

But, no, I joined Canadian University Service Overseas [our Peace Corps equivalent] and they sent me to India for two years. So I taught English at a posh boys' boarding school in rural Punjab until 1972. By that time, I'd been converted to Film Studies, partly because of all the Hindi films I saw over there. I did my M.A. and my PhD at Columbia University in New York and was in New York from 72 to 76. Then I was so lucky to get my job at Concordia ABD ["all but dissertation"] in 1976. There I finished the PhD and defended in 1981, got tenure the same year, and retired in 2017. Never looked back or elsewhere. That's my professional career. I've lived in Montreal, the same neighbourhood, all those years.

Daniel: You talked about your Calvinist Ontario upbringing... You glossed over it saying you hated it, but I wonder what you mean by feeling that you were missing out on the decade.

Tom: It may have had a little bit to do with missing out on gay lib, but not only. It was really the New Left that I was missing out on. I think I went to one tiny little



Western University, the most conservative university in the most conservative city in Canada, where the "sixties" passed the interviewee by.



Punjab Public School, 1972. The interviewee, having escaped from Ontario, coaches the winning debating team at a posh boarding school with a funerary monument on its grounds.



Two protagonists try to escape surveillance in the film seen by the interviewee the night he first hooked up with another man in 1968: 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968).

anti-Vietnam war demonstration the whole time I was at Western. There was an excitement and adventurous spirit in intellectual thought going on in the 1960s, but my profs were totally oblivious to it at Western—although come to think of it I did read Marcuse in one course. I'm understanding myself as a gay man at this point but I was very much closeted and had had only one or two sexual experiences. I love to tell this anecdote which you might have heard already: I lost my virginity to a man one night after I saw the first-run show of 2001: A Space Odyssey in 1968. I'm sure there's a connection, but I don't know what it is.

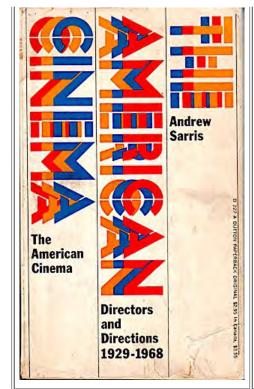
Being in India for two years, that helped me come to know myself, the relativity of my upbringing, and my need to branch out. So it was only when I hit New York in 72 that I really came out and joined the gay movement, as well as continuing my New Left affiliation. But studying Film Studies at Columbia was sort of an alienating experience because there really wasn't a space there for either of those affiliations. It was basically Andrew Sarris and auteur film history, so I had to look elsewhere in New York for both of those models to pursue. But fortunately—New York being New York—I found them. It was very exciting.

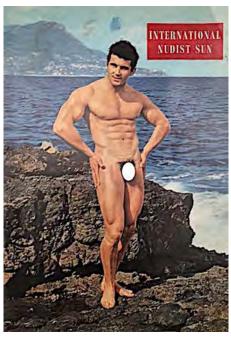
Daniel: You said you were thinking of yourself a gay man around that time, but how long had that been percolating?

Tom: Since high school I was aware of it. Since ninth grade, if not earlier. I dated girls in high school. Because it was my duty—and I thought, you know, this is okay, don't worry, just relax ... it wasn't really traumatic for me. I bided my time.

Daniel: Did you have a sense that something would come later, or that the time would come later?

Tom: I think I did. I mean, when I was in high school, I would engage in certain furtive activities—there was a really raunchy newsstand in downtown Guelph, across from the train station. So I would peruse physique magazines down there. The owner got very tired of me because I would never buy anything. And when the first frontal nude magazines came out around 68 or so, maybe slightly earlier, maybe 66 or 67, they didn't hit Guelph—so I had to take the family car and drive over to Hamilton to see one and—oh my God. That was like a paradise.





The 1968 bible of the Columbia University graduate film studies program in the 1970s.

A late 1960s "first": frontal nude beefcake magazine with nudist "alibi."

In Guelph—I was a bit of a sissy, I was an intellectual, a four-eyed intellectual. High achiever in high school. I was not a jock, but I found out that hanging out in locker rooms was a very stimulating experience. Those were the days when there were compulsory showers after every gym class in high school and nude swimming at the YMCA. I was sort of in heaven, it was fascinating. And I was a late starter too—I had skipped a grade so I was one year younger than all the other boys, and in addition, I went into puberty late. And so here I was, surrounded by these men in the flesh—these teenage boys in the prime of puberty—and it was very intense.

Daniel: I didn't know about nude swimming. I don't think I knew that that was a standard thing in schools.

Tom: Well, we didn't have a swimming pool but other high schools had it. I took swimming lessons in the nude at the Y. I remember once I invited my best friend, this was in grade 8 or so, to go swimming with me at the Y. We were both naked and I was *so* shocked that he had started growing his pubic hair! I was... fascinated! What's going on? Why am I missing out?







Swimming lessons at YMCA, North America, c. 1950s.



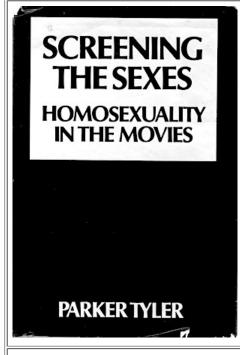
"Gay Socialist Action Project": the interviewee (left) demonstrating at the Democratic National Convention, New York City, 1976.

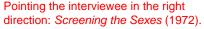
Daniel: (Laughs) Pubic hair envy is a really interesting thing. I don't think I have a moment of that. By the time I was in school, everything's obviously very clothed....

Could you now talk a little bit more about grad school in the 70s? Or New York in the 70s? I know you said that Columbia wasn't the spot for you in terms of their politics and queer cinema availability, or people working or thinking about those things. But where did you find that space for you in New York?

Tom: The only book I was reading that started to point me in the direction of a proto-queer field of film studies was Parker Tyler's *Screening the Sexes*. This came out at the start of the 70s and is a very important book.

First of all, I connected with a gay consciousness-raising group. They were not academics—we stole the idea from women's groups and we talked about identity and politics and sex and self. It was really nice. And then I got involved with a more specific group of more intellectual and politicized men; we called ourselves the Gay Socialist Action Project. There were actually two now-famous gay scholars in that group (John D'Emilio and Jonathan Katz). That was very important for me, it was instrumental. I started to think about how to apply this framework to my discipline. But at the same time, my research was not queer-focused at all. It was more New Left-focused. I had discovered, as my PhD thesis topic, Joris Ivens, the Marxist documentary filmmaker—and that's where I was going with that—but at the same time, I had one eye off in another direction.







The New Left discovers the Old Left: poster for Marxist documentarist Joris Ivens's 1970 solidarity documentary on the Laotian resistance to U.S. bombardment, *The People and Its Guns*. TW collection.



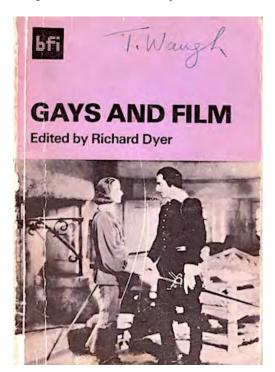
The interviewee's "splashy coming out" in 1977, his second feature on gay filmmakers for Toronto's *The Body Politic.* No. 35, (July-August 1977).

Just as I was leaving New York, the Gay Academic Union started meeting. It was soon destroyed by the rupture between quote-unquote "sexist gay men" and "lesbian separatists"—totally fell apart. But at a couple of the early conferences they had, I did present a paper on gay themes. I was talking about the queer directors I had discovered at Columbia through their auteur framework: Pasolini, Visconti, Anderson, and people like that. So the Gay Academic Union was a stepping stone, in a way.

When I came to Montreal, I wasn't doing specifically gay things but I certainly assigned Parker Tyler in my first film history course as an optional read. I think students couldn't believe their eyes. I'd met the *Body Politic* gang in Toronto and started doing film reviews for them throughout the rest of the 70s. I did feature articles for them on gay cinema and did a very splashy coming out in *Jump Cut* in 77.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

That's also when I met Richard Dyer because his book *Gays and Film* came out in 77, and wow, that knocked my socks off. A real paradigm shift. I wrote him—we did snail mail back in those days—and we met up in person when he came to New York. We've remained fast friends ever since. We're both retired now. That was very influential for me. I love that book, and that inspired me to throw caution to the wind and come out in the *Jump Cut* piece, even though I did not yet have tenure.

Concordia was a very liberal place—I was in the Faculty of Fine Arts. I'm sure they noticed it but didn't mention anything and it was fine. And it didn't interfere with my tenure at all—I was so afraid that in 1981 when I had my tenure hearings, I would get lavender-baited by the department ogre, but he didn't do that. A refugee from a Communist East Bloc country, he red-baited me instead. So I got through that all right.



Interviewee's well-thumbed, disintegrating copy of the "paradigm shift" *Gays and Film* (Richard Dyer, 1977).



Norman McLaren in eyebrow-raising ascot, c.1950. Courtesy National Film Board of Canada.

Daniel: I did want to ask about navigating your identity... queer identity as a new hire, you could publish things and no one would comment on it?

Tom: It was seemingly that. I even did a presentation showing gay films to the Concordia gay group. I think that was 77. I only had one or two gay students that I knew of, and one of them, a mature student, is Michael Hendricks—he's still around. He was the first man to get married in Quebec legally. And he connected me to lots of gossip because he worked at the National Film Board of Canada. That was the first time I heard that Norman McLaren was gay, insider stories like this—how everyone raised their eyebrows at Norman McLaren up in Ottawa because he wore sandals, which was like a mark of "homo." He was wearing ascots, too!

Daniel: A clarifying question for you: you mentioned *Screening the Sexes* and elsewhere you talked about other porn work that had been done prior to your 1985 piece. You mentioned the Siebenand dissertation and I wonder when you came in contact with that. If that was circulating around the time when it came out, which was 1975, or if you came into that much later.[2]

Tom: My hard copy was bought in 1982, so I must have certainly consulted it for the *Jump Cut* porn piece, which was probably written in 82 and didn't come out till 85. Who was it who mentioned it to me? I have no idea. I tracked it down and ordered it from Xerox University Microfilms—in those days, you had to order a hard copy of a dissertation from the United States that came in the mail. I read it and it's fascinating. I had political criticisms of it, but it was a very important step. I'd forgotten all about it.

Daniel; I was just reading through it but I have it on a PDF now. Wild that you can do an interview-based dissertation. It's a fascinating resource. You mentioned it in the "30 year revisit" for *Porn Studies*.[3] And Siebenand did not go on to do anything related to academia and pornography after that, is that true?

Tom: It seems! Undoubtedly there was this huge bias against his research and he was probably never able to get a job, who knows? I don't think I ever met the guy. He was a former priest or something, right?

Daniel: I think that's what Jeffrey Escoffier said to me, or that he might have gone on to be a priest.

Let's talk a little bit about personal porn history. Do you remember when your kind of first encounter with pornographic material was? And what was it?

Tom: Other than the physique magazines that I've already told you about, I can tell you more about that. I can go on endlessly about it... When I hit New York, of course I went to the porn cinemas a couple times. Not very often, it really wasn't my thing and I was sort of annoyed because I wanted to watch the movies and people kept harassing me. I felt a little bit uncomfortable sitting there with people groping me while I was watching the movie. That's just me, I guess. I saw a couple things there...

My emerging gay friend network, the "politically correct" one, sort of poo-poo'd the porn scene but another couple of my friends were very interested in archival porn. And we were fascinated by "Straight to Hell." Archival porn, like old physique magazines, were available in the second hand shop, "Physique Memorabilia," as well as "Straight to Hell" for sale there in the East Village. So I would go there regularly. I love "Straight to Hell" especially for the first-person stories which really worked for me much more than porn formulas. I was a film scholar but participating in cinema's "golden age of porn" didn't do that much for me in terms of film appreciation. I remember once my consciousness-raising

group went to the Museum of Modern Art for a screening of *L.A. Plays Itself*, which they had just acquired! One of the guys in the group even brought his parents with him. Couldn't believe it. I didn't really get it or understand why this is a massive piece of film art. It felt like a failing on my part. And now we have it in our "Queer Film Classics" book series[4] so I confess to my short sightedness back in 75.



Daniel: You feel differently about it now?

Tom: I still don't get it 100%. I mean it's a little bit of a "so what?" kind of thing.

Daniel: I love that he brought his parents to the MoMA to see... Halsted.

Tom: I would have died and been so embarrassed, I mean I hadn't come out to my parents yet. I think this is like a typical kind of New Yorker thing.

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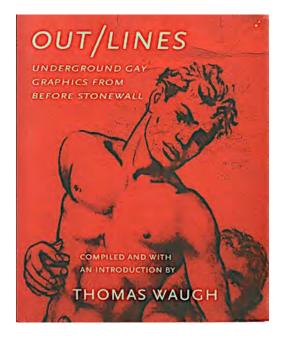
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Outlines: Underground Gay Graphics from Before Stonewall recirculated underground porn. It was the interviewee's first collection of drawings for Arsenal Pulp Press, 2005.



Daniel: I would actually like to talk about the physique mags. Two follow-up questions. So physique magazines were recirculating? "Physique Memorabilia" was a second hand shop, but was it like a gay second hand bookshop?

Tom: Yes. In the East Village. It was hilarious: you'd go in and say you were doing "research," and those jaded old queens who'd been around the block a few times would roll their eyes. After it closed. there was another reincarnation of it, "Gay Treasures" in the West Village.

Daniel: So they were recirculating as porn material even in the 70s.

Tom: And incidentally, that's where I got a lot of my drawings... underground erotic drawings from the same period that were eventually collected in the 21st century Arsenal Pulp picture books: *Out/Lines* [2002], *Lust Unearthed* [2004] and *Gay Art* [with Felix Lance Falkon, 2006]. I bought the original *Gay Art* book from 1972 when I was living in New York.

Daniel: Your first experience with physique magazines, was that in Hamilton or were they available in Guelph as well?

Tom: They were available in Guelph. Little magazines like *Tomorrow's Man*—I think even *Physique Pictorial* was there, and *Vim* and then the larger picture books. The picture magazines, the glossy ones, *Young Physique*. They were outrageous, straining against the boundaries of the censors. They were all but explicit. And it's not commonly known that, in the early 60s—I think this research is beginning to happen—these magazines were really pushing "gay liberation" in many ways.

Daniel: I'm reading *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement*[4] now. That argument is coming together now ... What was it like? Were you buying them or just kind of perusing them?

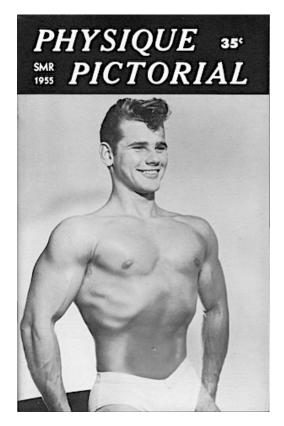
Tom: Oh, I didn't dare buy them. I would spend so long browsing that once the shop owner lost his temper with me, was sure I was shoplifting, grabbed my jacket and very aggressively demanded to know if I'd stashed anything. I hadn't of course—I ran all the way home, it was terrifying. I think the only magazine I ever bought was the one in Hamilton, the frontal nudes. Of course I couldn't bring that home. I "used it up" on the way and tore it into little shreds and threw it away.

Daniel: A heartbreaking little anecdote. So it was still a scary thing to buy? You write about the kind of alibis for producing the magazine, but then did those apply to the consumers as well?

Tom: I think the alert consumer would purchase them in sleazy joints where they assumed they weren't known and the owner would just sell anything as long as he got his money. In the small centers where there wasn't that kind of an establishment, then people got mail order. I'm a little bit surprised Guelph had them, but there was really only one shop that had them in stock. The other issue would have been where to store them: I had no privacy in the parsonage...

Daniel: Then for any kind of later porn consumption—did you mail order? Or were you mostly in book shops because you were in New York at the time?

Tomorrow's Man (1954) one of the more cautious of the pocket-size physique magazines of the 1950s (lots of weightlifting exercises).



Physique Pictorial (1955), Bob Mizer's influential, naughty and brassy market leader, produced in Hollywood (1951-1990).

Tom: Book shops. I would go to Times Square and buy a few magazines now and again, but they were expensive and I didn't have the money and in any case preferred *Straight to Hell*.

Daniel: After tearing up the physique magazine, when did you start collecting that? When did you keep it? When did it become something that you had to hold on to?

Tom: Probably late in my New York stay, but certainly once I moved to Montreal. I've only moved once in 45 years, so I had a tendency to be a pack rat and not have to throw things out every four years the way other people do because they keep moving. As soon as I moved to Montreal, I started storing... preserving things. That includes both photos and magazines, and at that time it included Super8 films or 1-inch cassettes and very soon they were replaced by VHS cassettes.

Daniel: Did it feel at any time like it was something that needed to be preserved? Did it feel like collecting, or just not throwing it away?

Tom: I felt it needed to be preserved for sure. I really appreciated the way *Straight to Hell* was an archive of unacknowledged queer history, both in vintage photos—I loved the really raunchy ones and hated the airbrush aesthetic—and the first person narratives.

Daniel: How has your relation to gay porn changed over the years? In 85, you wrote that it was both "our stroke material and our family albums," which I really liked.

Tom: I still feel that way but in the Internet age I haven't been able to keep on top of things. I'm not as technically canny as your generation and am really conscious of how much time one wastes wandering around the Internet. And I don't have that kind of time. I try to keep very productive. I've always been a bit of a workaholic. I'm not an expert on Internet porn. But I do see it, I'm aware of it. Sometimes use it. Thirty years later, the Internet has a history that we need to get into: I'm reading *The Elusive Embrace*, a gay memoir by Daniel Mendelson, written in the 1990s, and he goes on and on about AOL M4M chatrooms and it feels as if he's speaking ancient Greek (which he does a lot of also).

Daniel: I like the idea of wandering around the Internet. I think one of the things that I take from that 1985 article—that has really guided a lot of my research or has been useful a lot to me is the understanding of... your discussion of realism in porn and the kind of inverse relation between a kind of slickness and a realism or authenticity. And I wonder how you feel about that now.

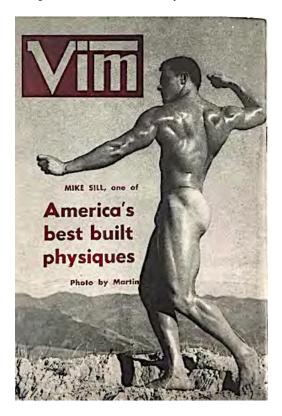
Tom: I think that's still true. I mean, the fetishization of the grain of the everyday —you go into this a lot in your work on the "amateur"—extends that kind of economy, doesn't it? Don't you also go into fake amateur vs. real amateur and all this kind of thing?

Daniel: I think that's a category for me that doesn't mean very much.

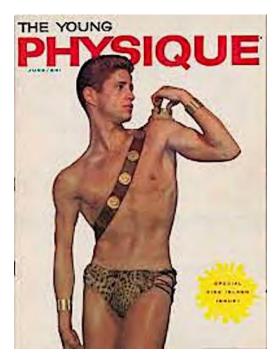
Tom: No, but some of the stuff that is demonstrably amateur, incompetent, has its resonance. I'm sure you agree.

Daniel: In terms of amateur filmmaking practices and amateur performance, there's something... That argument doesn't seem to have waned very much for people over the past 30/40 years. I've always found that really interesting.

Tom: And sometimes even in the slick stuff, the authenticity rings out and comes through as in... "those two guys are really into each other!" And they're not looking at the camera every five seconds. I'm sure you go into that as well, the



Vim (1957) both political and camp.



Following in Hefner's footsteps, *Young Physique* (1960) was the most visible and brazen of the large-size glossy skinmags of the 1960s.

breakthrough moments.

Daniel: Being one of the first scholars to publish in pornography, and also so early in your career, you return to pornography around 2015. There are bits in between, but it felt like you kind of came back to things like "art porn," Colby Keller, and confession. Was it a return or did you feel like you'd continued to write about porn throughout your whole career?

Tom: Part of it was—I really had to get Joris Ivens out of my system and produce the book based on my 1981 dissertation. Not only was it based on it, but the book tripled the size of the dissertation. I had to—that had been under contract for a long time and Minnesota University Press was so furious with me that they cancelled the contract. And so then I moved to Amsterdam University Press. That was a kind of discipline that didn't allow me to dabble in new porn research. But I feel it was continuous in the sense that the Arsenal Pulp books kept my finger in the pie in a certain way. I was also thinking about the Internet with "I'll never master this, it's not for me, it's for the younger generation to take over this area." That's why I mostly continued to work on vintage stuff, archival stuff. And when I Confess comes out[5] [open endnotes in new window] and my chapter there deals with some contemporary digital/online work, I didn't feel very authoritative about it. I felt it was a little bit tentative. I mean I consulted with some people of your generation a little bit. And I enjoyed what I was doing but just felt an impostor.

Daniel: Was there something that prompted the return? Just that there were new things that you wanted to speak about or was it the way the field had changed, or...?

Tom: I think it's because it tied in so well with my project of confessionality. And I actually don't remember where that came from specifically. It was a SSRHC grant I got in the late 2000s. I can't remember the exact immediate inspiration for that. I must have had my eye on the direction it would go in, I became increasingly interested in autobiographical work; I remembered having been so inspired when I wrote the piece on *Loads* in 1985, which is still one of my favourite films. I really think it's a masterpiece and maybe I was recycling that energy when I applied for the "I Confess" SSHRC grant and got it.

Moreover a new generation of doctoral students doing autobiographical work, like Ryan Conrad and Dayna McLeod, came on board at the start of the 2010s and inspired me. And some brilliant doctoral students working on porn like Brandon



Surprise of a Knight (U.S. stag film, c.1930, courtesy Kinsey Institute Archive). Coming back again and again to a unique treasure. Tucking and tenderness.

Arroyo and Evangelos Tziallas.

Daniel: Related to that, what is it like revisiting your old work on porn specifically? You did that both in the *Porn Studies* piece where you revisit "Men's Pornography" but also you come back to the *Surprise of a Knight* stagfilm a couple of times?

Tom: It's like flogging a dead horse, isn't it? But it's such a wonderful, wonderful film! And in a way, it hasn't been recognized—finally Kinsey has recognized it and decided it's worth producing research copies, and so other people are starting to talk about it. It's so unique, it's a treasure. I must have thought that my original writing on it held up and that it was worth recycling. It was a transformative moment to be in that attic at the Kinsey Institute in 1982 and seeing it for the first time on a 16mm projector and just being terrified that I was going to break the film or the projector, and that I would only be able to see it once. I had to take notes; actually I was doing a video recording of it and I fucked that up totally. I wonder what camera I was using at that time... I must have... rented a camera to take with me. This surprises me—back in 82, a video camera, but somehow I did.... Maybe I got it from Concordia IT. And I left the auto-focus on and it really ruined the... now we would say digitization, but it wasn't, it was—

Daniel: Magnetization?

Tom: Yes. And the other films I saw just blew my mind. They were amazing. I couldn't believe that our ancestors had made these films around the turn of the century, in the 1920s, queer stag movies. I'd been brought up with this myth of the dark ages and the closet, and all of this was going on. The gay lib generation didn't know about it.

Daniel: I'd like to talk about that work in the Kinsey but before I leave this question. Is there anything particular about revisiting that type of work and revisiting the things that you thought and felt about it—is there something particular about work on pornography that colours it, that makes you return to it? Whether it's an affective relationship, whether there's something about the text that you're working with that makes returning to working on it different or special? Does that make sense?

Tom: I guess this sounds very vain but I'm very proud of my work and the risks that I took. Though the *Jump Cut* piece was written with tenure, so it wasn't as risky as it might have been. Perhaps it's about legacy.

Hard to Imagine is not an e-book, and available only on very expensive hardcover reprint—with all those labour-of-love pictures carelessly allowed by the publisher to fade. I sometimes feel, for example with books like Buying Gay, that Hard to Imagine is not acknowledged by the whippersnappers. I guess I want to keep it in circulation because I think a lot of those old insights and materialist historiography are still valid. I owe it to all those kind elderly gentlemen who submitted to my interviews. I still have my photo of Otis Wade framed on my bathroom wall, the guy in Silver Lake who made the 1930s home movies on the beach that are so crucial in the book. That debt is very important.

Also I'm an archivist by nature and a historian by nature and I guess all that's a part of history. Sometimes the baby is thrown out by the bathwater by younger generations, and I guess I feel the need to keep that work circulating. I mean, is



Otis Wade (1905-1992). Kind elderly gentleman interviewed for *Hard to Imagine* whose contribution should be kept alive.

Richard's old work from the 70s and early 80s acknowledged and fully made use of? I don't think sufficiently.

Otherwise the *Jump Cut* piece was very much a feminist piece. The journal had sort of led an anti-porn crusade up until that point. I respect Julia, Chuck and John for having kept their minds open about a piece that treated porn seriously with a positive outlook from the gay community. They really sat me down and made me—well, this comes out in the piece you're referring to—made me solidify the feminist credentials that I was claiming. It wasn't a question of falsifying things, it was just a question of talking more about power and gender.

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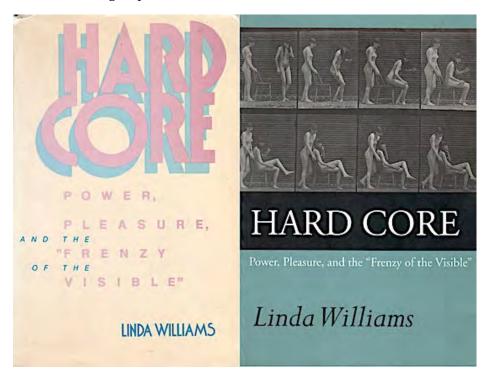
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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Daniel: People start with Dyer's 1991 stuff, don't they? I guess on that note, I'm looking for a question that I think I might have deleted. Do you have an ethics about writing about porn or a manifesto of how writing about porn should be done? I remember you talking about your fight to have the images included in *Jump Cut* and then you pressuring Linda Williams to include images in the reprint of *Hard Core*. And then there was something about *Porn Studies* the journal being kind of visually chaste. And I wonder if you feel we have a responsibility to include those images or anything else we have a responsibility to do when working on porn?



Linda Williams's *Hard Core*, covers from chaste (1989) to less chaste second edition (1999).

Tom: If you want to call that an ethics.... Yes, I feel very strongly about maintaining the visual elements. I mean after all, this is a history of images and it's ridiculous to talk about them without showing them. Linda brought out her book, her original book in 1989, while I was still struggling with publishers rejecting me en masse. I resented the fact that University of California Press had rejected me, published her book presumably because there were no pictures in it and probably because it was about heterosexual porn not gay. So it's also personal spite toward a then cowardly and homophobic publisher as well as ethics.

Daniel: It's a great motivator!

Tom: I still hate the University of California Press to this day.

Daniel: There's a link to working with archives but also working with publishers. Was there an issue with printing the book after it had already been accepted? We're talking about *Hard to Imagine*, right?

Tom: You've read the article about that process, right? It's republished in *The*



"B.M.," New York City, 1952

"Penis bouquet" (1952), reproduced in the previous decade in *The Body Politic*, arbitrarily excluded from *Hard to Imagine* by great legal minds



Forbidden blowjob in uniform (c. World War II): Kinsey holding reproduced in *The Body Politic* 1984 but not permitted in *Hard to Imagine* 12 years later.

Fruit Machine, but that article was originally in a Canadian book.[6] [open endnotes in new window] And it talks about the horrible ordeal I went through that includes everything from having people's faces grafted onto those nine illicit photos that the lawyers got hysterical about to the original threatened lawsuit.

Kinsey had discovered almost by accident that I'd published my research in the *Body Politic*, which was the forum for a lot of really essential gay studies back then, gay history. People like Alan Bérubé, John D'Emilio, Jonathan Katz and Jim Steakley also published in the *Body Politic*. Kinsey threatened to sue me a couple years after I published it, which was horrifying to me, I couldn't believe it. And I got a whole support network of leading scholars to write letters in protest to the Kinsey Institute. And when dozens of letters came in, they didn't know what hit them. And they demanded to know what I had told all these people because the letters were so outraged.

And the salt in the wound was the fact that this lawyer who threatened the lawsuit, Harriet Pilpel, had been their lawyer ever since 1956 when she had defended Alfred Kinsey from U.S. Customs—I couldn't believe this brave American Civil Liberties Union lawyer was now being used to come after me. So I learned quite a lot about working with archives there. Once the threat was dropped, the negotiations about the illustrations in *Hard to Imagine* were painful, they went on and on, year after year after year.

And some of the key photos were not allowed in the book. I just happen to have a couple right here. This wonderful... penis bouquet was not allowed in the book. I can't remember why. What else is here? This famous WWII blowjob was not in the book but it was in the *Body Politic* article. So a lot of the very important evidence was not allowed into the book. Columbia University Press felt they were being very brave, and they were—let's give credit where credit is due. But they sicced lawyers on me and these cretinous lawyers were behind all of these strategies that the press undertook. For example no image on the cover!

And then they started talking to Canadian lawyers who were even worse-- they were thinking about distributing the book in Canada as well.

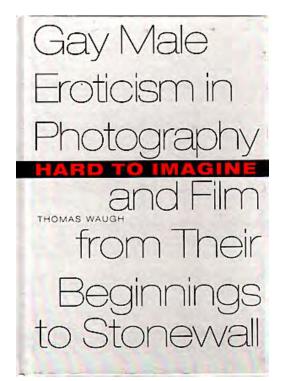
Aside from Kinsey, working with publishers made the archival work seem like a breeze. I went to all kinds of gay archives in Toronto and Montreal and in Europe —in Holland, Paris, Germany and the U.K. In those days, I can't believe this, I was riding my rented bicycles around the capitals of Europe with a big analogue photo stand bungee-strapped to the back to take photos I could use in the book in these archives. I got permission in the archives, it worked fine, but I can't believe I was doing that.

Daniel: You were taking photographs of the photos?

Tom: Yes. There was no other way to do it. Because often community archives didn't have good high resolution photocopy machines, and of course they couldn't allow you to take the photos off the premises.

Daniel: You weren't working with negatives?

Tom: No. I don't know whether I could have. Where would you get them



Hard to Imagine cover, Columbia University Press, 1996: lawyers nix pix.

developed? Many labs would call the cops. I did have a lab here that "understood" and developed all my things so I guess I could have got them—but how would I have copied the negative? So that was the solution we had and it was short lived, you don't have to do that anymore. Another issue was getting the film stills, the frame captures. I got the very very kind Kinsey photographer William Dellenback to do those for me; he had worked with Kinsey and was still kicking. He and his generation were very supportive of my work, it was his successors who were evil. And fortunately they're all gone now, and the Institute is very friendly again.

Daniel: But that's very recent, isn't it?

Tom: Maybe in this century. I also had very positive experiences in the European community archives and in places like the Library of Congress in Washington. I can't remember what I got there, maybe the work of some of the U.S. art photographers.

Daniel: We received all of Chuck's collection at the SRC and I was processing it. I actually saw one of your letters to Chuck about soliciting a letter for Kinsey.

Tom: Did you find his shoe fetish cheesecake?

Daniel: All 300,000 photos of them, yeah.

Tom: He started it all! Because he was a graduate of Indiana so he knew that there was this resource on campus.

Daniel: That was a wild collection to unpack but also it's really nice to trace that lineage and the history of you working at the Kinsey through Chuck.

Let's talk about teaching this material? We talked about finding it, we talked about writing about it, but I'd like to talk about teaching it because that's where I first met you, in the Sexual Representation Course.

Tom: I started teaching that course as a seminar, an undergraduate seminar in the early 80s after I got back from Kinsey and I was terrified. Not so much by the ethics of it, more by the politics and logistics of it. Everything from thinking about how the unionized technician would project such scurrilous works to whether there would be students who would not be able to take it. Maybe some of the "feminist" issues too about whether the work would have a harmful impact on sensitive people. But it was an elective seminar so that never came up. The women loved the seminar, as did the men. And so I got a little bit braver as time unfolded and eventually turned it into a larger course.

Then at a certain time in the 90s, Richard Kerr was Chair of Cinema and his eyes lit up and he thought, this was going to be a real money maker for the department. Let's open it up to 200 students and have the course in our largest campus auditorium, and we got away with that too! I used to have to keep eagle eyes open to see if anyone wandered in from de Maisonneuve Boulevard and saw *Deep*



Adonis male strip club in Montreal's Gay Village (2000 +), studiously observed by interviewer Daniel Laurin.



Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975), perennial syllabus entry leaves students pale. Frame grab.



Loads (Curt McDowell, 1980), perennial syllabus

Throat up on the huge screen. If so, I would kick them out, you had to be registered. I can't believe how well it worked! We had lively—and you probably remember them—student discussions of the work. People doing these dramatic testimonial interventions from the floor. I'm very proud of that course, including the sexuality research projects where we sent people in teams out into the community; I think they worked very well.

Daniel: I went to a strip club. I went to the Adonis. It was a great time! It was the first time I had been, actually. One of the dancers—it was his birthday. He had his girlfriend in the audience and he was going around to everyone telling them it was his birthday and she was cheering for him.

Tom:. I remember one team went to a straight strip club. And it was two men and two women. It was where the performer on the other side of the glass window spread for the spectator with her feet right up on the glass and sort of strokes and contorts around. The women were fascinated and asking her questions. And the guys almost fainted. I can't remember if they were gay or straight, maybe one of each. I learned a lot.

Daniel: Do you remember what the screening program was in the first iteration of the course?

Tom: It was very similar to what has evolved over the years. I definitely showed *In The Realm of the Senses*, I definitely showed *Salo*. I'm a little bit of a sadist because I really enjoyed showing *Salo*. This is terrible, this confession! Enjoying seeing students getting pale and out of breath at arty and simulated BDSM imagery, especially male students. It tended to be a little bit of a cinephile selection so probably Bunuel's 1930 $L'\widehat{A}ge\ d'or$ was always there. And in the 80s, we had an archival copy of *Different from the Others* (1919) with John Greyson's voice on the soundtrack reading English, because all we had was the Ukrainian fragment version at that time. That all worked fine in the seminar for advanced students. Now in the past 25 years, it's been available for anyone who needs an elective! And commerce students from the Middle East would line up and take it as an elective, and really get an eyeful!

Daniel: Were there things that you added in later years that you were worried about? An addition you were worried would spark controversy or would not go over well?

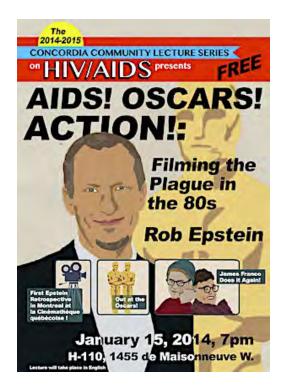
Tom: Two things. I used to show *Loads*, and that always needs to be discussed. I remember one woman, at the time of the porn wars, felt that the film glorified submission and power relations. And we had a really good discussion about how desire and relationships do involve power, and this is a very honest treatment of that. It actually seemed to make sense and I thought they really factored in those points in their understanding of the film, and maybe moved a little bit beyond the knee-jerk anti-porn thing.

The other film that I discovered in the late 90s was *Sadomasochism* by a Canadian artist of African descent who has recently just joined Concordia, Deanna Bowen. It's a video about a whole lot of different things, from the history of the civil rights movement and police violence to lesbian SM, about lesbian SM roleplaying told in bouncing subtitles on a black screen intermixed with this

entry triggers... good discussion about power and relationships, not to mention heterosexuality. Frame grab.



Sadomasochism (Deanna Bowen, 1998). Lesbian powerplay script within a challenging collage.



Concordia AIDS Lecture Series, 1993-2017: regularly featuring artists and filmmakers.

archival imagery of police violence against Black protesters. And that also needs lots of discussion. It's actually the film on the whole syllabus that is the most challenging for students who are unprepared for it or sensitive. Scary images. I kept it on the syllabus and used it to good advantage. It's a wonderful video but it's a tricky one.

Daniel: You mentioned teaching this class and the porn wars. Were there periods where you felt that the tone of the class shifted? Did it ever become more combative? Did you ever feel that teaching it was trickier because of the time that you were teaching it?

Tom: Not really. I was pleasantly surprised. I mean obviously the anti-porn crusaders did not take the course, to my memory. And in Quebec, people have a more open mind historically than in Toronto. That atmosphere, and also the fact that it was in the Faculty of Fine Arts, meant that there was a tolerance, a welcoming of challenging images. We nevertheless represented in the readings the anti-porn positions. I believe when we taught *Deep Throat*, we used some of Linda Marciano's memoir.... Somehow I managed to make use of the awkward political context. Showing *Not a Love Story: A Film about Pornography* (Bonnie Sherr Klein, 1981) was always a huge learning experience; my students were so smart in unravelling all that manipulative class-patronizing and homophobic bullshit in the film without any prodding whatsoever.

Daniel: Another course that I think that really is now part of Concordia University's identity is the community lecture series on HIV-AIDS. Can you talk a little bit about how that project came about and then how that it changed over time?

Tom: Towards the end of the 80s, when the international AIDS conference was to be held in Montreal, I joined a committee to do the video program for the AIDS conference. At the same time I joined a committee at Concordia set up by the President, to come up with guidelines for Concordia, mostly human resources guidelines but in general an anti-discrimination program. We met over a couple of years and came up with good anti-discrimination guidelines. Donald Boisvert who was the Dean of Students, who just died last year, was also part of that committee. We did a good job, but then I realized gradually this is not enough, there has to be an academic initiative, not just a human resources initiative. At this time, faculty were aware that there was a small number of students who were disappearing. That increased the urgency of the task, so I started the AIDS lecture series in 93-94. Then the following year, the course started based on the lecture series. Integrating the two was a way of their funding each other. There was a kind of symbiosis between the lecture series and the course.

I actually don't know if the course is continued after I retired, I think it might have. I won't let any personal venom get into this but they let the lecture series die at Concordia. But I maintained it right until 2017. Looking at that repertory of four or more speakers per year over 25 years—is it 25? Almost 25! I'm very proud of that. I hope that is being properly archived. Probably not, but I should ensure that it is. A lot of the events are presentations on video. And we made sure it was interdisciplinary, both quote-unquote "scientific" experts and arts experts. We had lots of artists come, for example, people like Margie Gillis and Rob Epstein. We made sure that there was at least one P.W.A. every year speaking in the series. And sometimes our auditorium was full, for example when A.A. Bronson spoke about the work of his General Idea collective comrades who had died... At other times it was pretty sparsely attended. I learned a lot about organizing on-campus events like that and the importance of publicity.

Daniel: All of those lectures have been recorded?

Tom: I think most of them.

Daniel: Because you had a working budget, I think, right? Cause you had—I think it was thirty thousand dollars a year to bring all of those guests?

Tom: We started out with that grant from one of the "evil" AIDS-pharmacological producers. It was sort of fashionable in the ACT UP backrooms of the day to disparage these corporations. They were actually very nice people to ask though, of course, it's the P.R. angle that got us the money to start out. But then that money dried up, and we managed to get internal funding year after year after year. Oh, it was so hard but we managed.

Daniel: It was not something that was then kind of built in? It was always a reapplying from different sources every year?

Tom: Yes, it was torture.

Daniel: I really hope that those have all been archived. That would be remarkable to have access to years of all of those. Do you know who has those?

Tom: I think on the Concordia website, there's sort of an irregular sprinkling of things. I have a lot of the videos in my collection. I think there's also an archive online of them. It's a very good question. Yeah, at one point I made the coordinator a student employee. So to hire them new, you had to get Canada Summer Jobs money. At one point I got them to set up an archive that I bet might still be there. This is one of the many legacy projects I should be working on but I'm not.

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Little Sisters bookstore, Vancouver, has led anticensorship struggles in Canada since 1990.

Daniel: I'd like to talk a little bit about—I'd like to finish discussing the archives you're donating. But before we do that I'd like to talk a little bit briefly about your role as an expert or "Sex"pert, and having been called to speak for or to—I don't know if it's 'advocate' for, but it's to speak for or to pornography, but also sexuality in general. So I'm thinking of both the Little Sisters case but also the task force on cruising in the bathrooms of the Hall building.

Tom: Those are both minor episodes, really. Yes I did testify at the trial on behalf of the Little Sisters bookstore in Vancouver in the late 90s. Explained about the landscape of porn in Canada.[7] [open endnotes in new page] I didn't do very well —I don't know why exactly, but Joseph Arvay, the lawyer, felt that I hadn't said the right things. The disgusting lawyer for the federal government showed me all these scat magazines and asked me something about whether I would allow them to be sold in corner stores, or something... That reinforced my idea of lawyers being sleazy ogres. Couldn't believe that she was trying to discredit me in that way.

They had read the *Jump Cut* piece where I said that I was in favour of the Scandinavian model of excluding the category of obscenity from the Criminal Code. They did a little bit of research at least. How did they ever find that in the pre-digital era, they must have gone to the library and taken one of these crumbling newsprint copies of *Jump Cut*.

Daniel: I had to do that recently in our library because I was looking for the illustrations for the 1985 porn piece and they were not included in the online version. We have all the newsprint issues, so I found them. After a long time, the images are now back on the *Jump Cut* website, right? For your piece in 1985. I went and I scanned every page of that journal and tweeted out the images—it was fun to go through such a big pile...

Tom: Chuck and Julia were so afraid that people in so-called developing countries were accessing *Jump Cut* online including the porno images, and that they would go to jail, which is probably true, but they've moved beyond that now.

Daniel: Can you talk a little bit about the task force Concordia set up for the Hall building? Because I couldn't find anything written about that.

Tom: It didn't have much of an impact and it was just a way I think for the administration to jerk us off. My sociologist comrade-in-arms Fran Shaver and one or two other people were on this task force because we were outraged that a guy off the street had been arrested in the Hall Building toilet and handed over to the cops, taken to the station and charged. He happened to be a member of the Armed Forces and was then expelled from the army. Concordia security had participated in this lynching of this guy. We insisted that this committee be composed. We talked about it for a year and came up with what we thought was sort of a tolerable solution, like warning signs such as "this toilet is patrolled, be careful." Here's a sign we produced:



Proposed warning sign by Concordia's toilet sex task group, a committee compromise solution that campus Security and lawyers didn't waste any time with. 1990s.

Daniel:. Oh wow! Oh that's very direct. It's not just that these premises are being patrolled ... I love the speed that you've been able to pull out these pieces. That when talking about the Kinsey, they were right there and then you knew exactly where the sign was.

Tom: Well, I have my archive on my walls. I mean, you've been here, you know this. But the University didn't take this seriously, the findings we gave them. And that sign may have gone up for five minutes or something. They just continued what Security wanted, consultation with university lawyers etc.—so we just wasted our time, basically. And I believe the arrests continued.

Daniel: Your sign itself is fantastic. And that's very interesting, just to think of that kind of group being formed, and that you were able to kind of advocate for the space or for the rights of the people in that space, is wonderful.

I think I'd like to finish off talking about what's coming in your donation to the Sexual Representation Collection. So what we're receiving and then any kind of favourites in the collection that you're giving to us or interesting stories of acquisition.

Tom: There's a lot of Kinsey material...

Daniel: There's a lot of beefcake images coming, right?

Tom: Yes. I'm not quite sure what's coming, actually. I think when Patrick and I sort it all out, it'll be fresh in my mind... For example there are binders of photos from *Hard to Imagine* and the Arsenal Pulp picture books. There are tons of VHS's and magazines. I did unfortunately already give some of the *Straight to Hell*'s to the Quebec Gay Archives. I was actually scared, there was some raids going on and some of the *Straight to Hell*'s are very suggestive territory. I thought, even if these are textual, I don't really need them around and I would rather get rid of them. The law does not know how to distinguish between first-person coming-of-age stories and kiddie porn.

Daniel: Raids where? When?

Tom: In Montreal. So, yeah. So I deposited them in the Gay Archives, not that they appreciated them. And I really regretted doing that, I should not have.

Daniel: Do you have any kind of projects that you envision or hopes for the collection? Work that you'd like to see come out of it?

Tom: Not specifically. I mean, we'll talk about this once we've packed the boxes. Anything that's in there that is personal, I myself would probably like to make use of in my memoirs. I don't know where there's personal stuff in there. Everyone I assume will go through the binders to pull out something I need. That's where these, um, high resolution photocopies came from. And I think I probably also have a file somewhere, a research file that was behind the *Jump Cut* piece, so you'll get that as well. But yeah, I can't think of where I might be going in that direction. I told you I am working on my memoirs and that's very challenging. I want the book to be very frank and sexual as well as reflective of a certain cultural history as well. I'm worried about whether a publisher is going to take on something like that. So what it involves, among many other things, is getting in touch with all these old boyfriends I haven't been in touch with for 20, 30 years.

Daniel: Do you have a form letter?

Tom: No! Asking them for their permission to run X naughty photo or some not-so-naughty is a very personal process. Some say not, but some say sure. For the ones where I don't have permission, I'm in touch with a visual artist and he's going to do unrecognizable black and white watercolour renditions of the forbidden photos.

Daniel: Where are you with that right now? What stage are you at?

Tom: I've submitted eight chapters to Arsenal Pulp to see if they'll go with it. And they've been sitting on them for up to two months. That's a little bit scary to me, so I wonder what's going on. I guess it takes the publisher a long time to move down the pile of submitted manuscripts, but you know, you'd think I'd have a favoured status. And then there's another publisher who's sort of nibbled at it, but I don't think they know how big and ambitious it is in terms of a balance of text and image.

Daniel: You've submitted 8 chapters? How many do you imagine it will be by the end?

Tom: Maybe twelve or thirteen? It's coming along. I just wrote my Boyfriends' chapter and I started counting and I realized that there are 30 men I wanted to include little profiles of, and is that going to be pretty boring for the reader? I don't know. So I have to figure out what to do about these little profiles of these men with obviously longer pieces on the major ones. But it also calls into question —it's very queer, it calls into question if it's a boyfriend or partner or lover. I

mean, the spectrum—the graduated spectrum between trick and fuckbuddy and lover in queer culture is very, very ambiguous. And I'm not the first person to discover this ...

Daniel: You could always do something like what's added to *Love in the Time of Cholera* [click to see]. That would mean family trees that laid out all of the characters for you, something folded out maybe. It was really useful when I was reading it because you could flip back and then refer to this chart.

Tom: That's an idea!

Tom: Well one of the major figures has given me full license and I'm very honoured by his trust in me. The book is extremely frank and let's hope he doesn't regret it when it comes out. Otherwise a few people have just been yammering at me about ethics. Meanwhile I've been reading all these memoirs which are very frank about sexual histories and networks of people. And not all of them use assumed names. This Norwegian bestseller that you might have heard of, by Karl Ove Knausgaard, a straight man who's written eight volumes of autobiography about his very boring life, uses everyone's names. No one in his family or his relationship history will speak to him because he used their names without permission. And some publisher was willing to go with it. I think mostly publishers will ask you "You've got permission for all of this?" But someone did not, so...

Daniel: Does it involve—do you have to kind of give a summary of what you're including in advance for permission? Or are you just asking to tell the story?

Tom: The latter, usually. I'm trying to be as respectful as I can, but my feeling is that people, in my life, over the years, do not have the right to say "You cannot write about me", because they are part of my life and history. So if I have to use an assumed name in the case of certain people, I will do that. But how diligent must I be in hiding their identity? Like, making up false details about my own life? No.

Daniel: That's interesting. Or, like, changing their jobs or changing the timelines...

Tom: Yeah. I haven't solved all these problems yet. I don't think you are in it.

Daniel: Come on! A footnote. A footnote.

Tom: (laughs) I think there's a certain incident I mention once, but I can't remember—

Daniel: (laughs) You can use my name.

Tom: Oh, lovely! Thank you! So that's what I've been working on.

Daniel: Are there projects that you're working on simultaneously or ones that you have, or is it just a list of things that come afterwards?

Tom: One thing I'm working on simultaneously is not a scholarly project. I'm the oldest surviving person in my blood family that has only two of four siblings left. I don't have any offspring as you probably know, but I'm the eldest and the one with the strongest memory of our family history. And we have 9,000 now digitized family photos and slides.

Daniel: Wow.

Tom: So I'm going to take a whole year with a daily quota and go through them all and caption them all one by one so that my memory will not be lost on who these people are. My brother is three years younger than me—he doesn't really care. So



Waugh family photo archive. Probably the interviewee's great aunt Minnie, rural Ontario, c.1920s. Fighting against loss of memory and heritage.

it's really up to me to share with my great nephews and nieces what their great-great-great grandfather looked like, and great-great-great grandmother. This is what I've been doing: it's another interesting archival project and it's fascinating. I do remember most of these people, but... who the fuck are *they*? This is a picture obviously of people starving to death on the Prairies in the 1930s. Why is this in our family archive?

Daniel: And you have no one to ask-

Tom: No one to ask. It's just that.

Daniel: Those are two family monumental projects!

Tom: It's really monumental. And I'm having fun! I mean, recognizing my great great great immigrant grandparents from the 1860s, or my great aunt Minnie, whom I only knew as an elderly "spinster" shopkeeper who wore too much rouge and had a leg amputated—and there she is as a handsome, vaguely flapper-ish young woman in the 1920s. There is one cityscape I saw with a really majestic river and a majestic railway bridge over the river, and I thought... what is this place? And I went on Google and searched for the image, and Google came up with Saskatoon. Wow! So what was my grandfather doing in Saskatoon? Well, he was also a preacher and he had a charge—a church like an hour away from Saskatoon, turns out, in the "dust bowl" 1930s. So that's where that came from.

Daniel: That must be fun to piece together. That's all of my questions that I have. Is there anything you feel that you'd like to add or something that we didn't address that you would like to?

Tom: Finally I'm really preoccupied, even after retirement, with an eruption of what Laura Kipnis calls "sexual paranoia comes to campus," or what your U of T comrade-prof Brenda Cossman calls "The New Sex Wars." Concordia was one of those "progressive" institutions that jumped on the post-#MeToo bandwagon and developed knee-jerk codes that threw out the baby of natural justice and due process with the bathwater, without really consulting sexual minorities, without negotiating the challenge of listening to and accommodating victims alongside preserving academic freedom and constitutional rights, and without generally thinking things through. So sexual representation, politics, and history are really on my mind in a way that affects everyday lives.

Otherwise I can't think of anything to add, but maybe I will. I'm really sorry that I'm not more on top of what the Sexual Representation Collection is going to get. Yeah, I have to take a day off and do a focused search before Patrick arrives, and then we'll go through my whole life together and put it in cartons.

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Notes

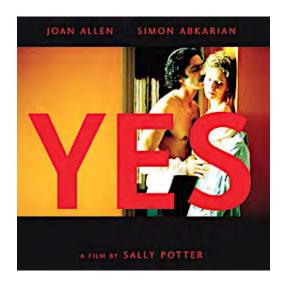
- 1. Thomas Waugh, "Who Are We? A Very Natural Thing, The Naked Civil Servant: Films by gays for gays," Jump Cut, no. 16, 1977, pp. 14-18. [return to page 1]
- 2. Siebenand, Paul Alcuin. *The Beginnings of Gay Cinema in Los Angeles: The Industry and the Audience.* PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1975.
- 3. Waugh, Thomas. Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight': a personal revisit. *Porn Studies*, Volume 4, 2017 Issue 2: Gay Porn Now! Guest Edited by John Mercer. 131-138.
- 4. by David K. Johnson | Feb 19 2019 CUP
- 5. *I Confess: Constructing the Sexual Self in the Internet Age.* Edited with Brandon Arroyo, PhD. McGill Queen`s University Press. 2019. [return to page 2]
- 6. "Archeology and Censorship," in Lorraine Johnson, ed., *Suggestive Poses:* Artists and Critics Respond to Censorship," (Toronto: Toronto Photographers Workshop and The Riverbank Press, 1997), 101-117. Rpt. *The Fruit Machine:* Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema. Duke University Press, 2000 (272-296). [return to page 3]
- 7. https://bcbooklook.com/bookselling-little-sister-s-no-longer-guilty-until-proven-innocent/ A useful summary of this landmark case in Canadian queer history. [return to page 4]

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Official Poster of YES (2004). According to the book Yes: Screenplay and Notes (Potter, Berger, Mishra), Potter started writing the film script immediately after 9/11 "as a response to the demonization of the Arab world in the West and the simultaneous wave of hatred against America" (from the blurb).

Questions of counter cinema and Sally Potter's YES

by Temmuz Sürevva Gürbüz

Sally Potter's 2004 film YES is a point of intersection for some overlapping questions that have occupied counter cinema discourse, feminist film theory and discussions of postmodernism since the 1970s. These questions revolve around the politics of representation, particularly about how to navigate the role of ideology in the construction of our subjecthood, and accordingly, our representation. (Here I am specifically concerned with screen representation and I use the term "our" to refer to any human subject that is said to be represented on screen.) As both feminist film theory and counter cinema politically negotiate with the ideological apparatus (i.e. mainstream cinema), there's generally a tension between rejection—and turning to and territorializing the concept of avant-garde as oppose to mainstream—and recognition—still seeking mainstream representation. Since patriarchal ideology is understood to reinforce specific subject positions through binary oppositions and to subordinate delineated others, for feminist and counter cinema scholars representational politics on the level of the mainstream generally has meant a self-defeating attempt at independence.[1] [open endnotes in new page] It is perhaps fair to say that that was the case in cultural and media studies until the (now-out-of-fashion term) "postmodern turn," which welcomed hybridity and paradox.[2]

Potter's film YES emerged at a time when the discussion of postmodernism (then on decline) seemed potentially helpful to discuss new feminist practices, ones that aimed to create signifiers and aesthetics that could speak beyond representational politics. I am talking about a historical, transitional moment during which paradoxical formations and fragmentation in art and life in general were welcomed, while gaps between cultural dichotomies such as avant-garde and popular or counter cinema and mainstream were relatively eased. I will argue in this article that Sally Potter's cinema, and particularly YES, epitomizes this transition. The film offers us a cinematic experience that can help reflect on what happened to postmodernism, for that term is in crisis, and to reconsider the crisis of representation that still continues to infiltrate many discussions surrounding (feminist) cinema.

Situating Potter

In her cinema, Sally Potter has traced how representational politics work within a Western context as well as explored aesthetic-theoretical constructions of the gendered subject—which have been frequent topics of research for feminist film scholars for decades now.[3] As Sharon Lin Tay discusses in detail, Potter's filmography has responded to turbulences within feminist film theory, from her earlier works, such as the mid-length *Thriller* (1979) which has been regarded as one of the ultimate examples of "feminist theory filmmaking," to her later more



Thriller (1979), Potter's 34 minute-long film based on Giacomo Puccini's La Bohème, mostly consists of the opera's main character Mimi's (Colette Laffont) contemplation on the writing of the opera itself. The fade-in establishing shot is accompanied with Mimi's laughter which was read as a hysterical marker of "her search for a solution in the writings of the male thinkers" (Rich 231). B. Ruby Rich's highly cited framing of the film as a resistance against "the manipulation of women's lives" established the film as the cinematic landmark of feminist deconstruction(228).







The Gold Diggers (1983). The first shot above (being the token shot of the film) is taken from

"mainstream art-house" productions within which Tay positions YES (84-85).[4]





The main character speaking into a mirror as a self-reflexive method of adaptation in *Thriller*.

Reading and internal voiceover, blurring subjective and objective sound perspectives, have been frequent features of Potter's cinema since *Thriller*.

The discussions around how to penetrate the sexist ideology of Classical Hollywood and how to create a feminist cinema have involved critiquing a rigid distinction between counter cinema and mainstream—a distinction feminist film theory also often reiterated within its domain. Tay suggests that a change in Potter's direction reflects this, moving from experimentalism and formal subversion—found in Thriller and The Gold Diggers (1983)—towards an embrace of more traditional forms of narrative progress and visual pleasure in her later films. This artistic move can be seen as a sign of awareness in terms of how feminist thought involves ideas that can contradict and transform over time. On the one hand, some feminists called for an emancipated space through the concept of feminist counter cinema and rejected Classical Hollywood's potentiality for such reclamation following the publication of Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975. On the other hand, there continued to be an ongoing call for mainstream representation. These perspectives have been in communication and later became closer to each other, therefore I don't yet intend to make a distinct division between them. It is exactly the shifting of this feminist scaling that Potter responded to. [5]

In her analysis of Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (1997)—the forebearer of *YES*—Lucy Fischer underlines how Potter's cinema involves some of the critical positions that "disputed Mulvey's rejection of classical form and attempted to locate gaps and fissures in mainstream works that voiced female rebellion" (45). Arguably, these tensions in feminist film theory and practice were relatively loosened after the "postmodern turn" as Mulvey herself revisited her theories in 1989 in "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure." There she proposed some combined effects of "tradition and mass culture" on narrative cinema that manifested alternative potentials for visual pleasure.

Similar to how Mulvey later embraced possible multiplications of "the look," counter cinema discourse later also included into its territory some potential mainstream forms that could accommodate avant-garde elements (Perry). In this regard, it is important to remember that postmodernism was for a while the framework that helped to make sense of blurring of counter cinema's borders, just as it was a useful concept for feminism as it negotiated reclaiming space and language within popular culture. We can still observe that struggle continuing in

the scene in *The Gold Diggers* where a waltz ends up men falling over the ground and women dancing with each other and leaving the men on the floor (men also start dancing with each other – see the above images). The dress code and rules for the waltz based on gender difference are all subjected to a direct reversal of roles which is associated with the aforementioned "feminist deconstruction". This directness, however, is in contrast with the film's indirectness in terms of narrative.

our post-postmodern time within public discourse since the issue of representation has become harder to differentiate from the tricky subject of objectification of women (which has specific trajectories in Hollywood and genre systems). The issue of representation has also been more vocalized in relation to industrial aspects of sexism, such as the gender pay gap (though this particular issue on mainstream media mostly involves the industry's 1%).





Character voiceover turning into clearly diegetic when Orlando looks at the camera and speaks onscreen for only three words: "That is... I..." An internal voiceover completes the sentence: "came into this world."

Orlando's hand over the empty page (they won't write anything yet), coupling the ambiguity of voiceover with Orlando's self-construction of their own story.

Tay touches upon this point about blurred borders of feminist concepts, for example, in her delineation of feminist political film practices based on the contemporary poststructuralist rejection of sexual difference. Tay maps Potter's film *Orlando* (1993) directly onto this feminist-political tension, stating that *Orlando*'s "budget, production values, and status as a European co-production situate it very much within mainstream cinema in British industrial terms" (88). Here, the postmodernist discussion of counter cinema-blending-into-mainstream coincides with the feminist problematization of essentialism and a potential "exit from a film movement that assumes the essentialist idea of sexual difference" associated with 1970s feminist film theory (Tay 89) (see the Orlando opening shots using internal voiceover/self-reflexivity as an ambiguous expression of gender). At this crossroads, we still face the question of representation that is supposed to decide what is the right way of representing an assumed subject, be it women, or other others.

Currently the question of representation, especially with respect to marginalized identities, seems to have become one of the most-attended-to issues in contemporary media. However, in the recent past, the idea of the "postmodern condition" used to seem potentially helpful to delineate the very process of marginalization itself, as postmodernism welcomed the concept of fragmentation when it came to identity (McRobbie). Now, even though discussions around how representation has replaced the concept of selfhood (e.g, we don't actually have a "real self") still resonate (Matthewman and Hoey), postmodernism as a concept has lost much of its significance. For example, in her article "Love's Cosmopolitan Promise in Sally Potter's *Yes*," Jackie Stacey conceptualizes *YES* and the cultural binarisms that are put into scrutiny in this film in relation to "cosmopolitanism"—a term that seems to replace postmodernism.

Here I don't intend to revive postmodernism or attempt to prove its usefulness in our current time. Rather, I would like to explore the mobilizations of signifying terms, such as the assumed subjects of postmodernism, feminism or counter cinema. This is the sort of mobilization Judith Butler talked about when they tried to avoid the trap of defending postmodernism in their response to the critiques of postmodernism, utilizing the concept of postmodernism in pointing out societal



Orlando: First shot of the film, Orlando (Tilda Swinton) is reading but instead of the character speaking, there is an internal voiceover: "there could be no doubt about his sex despite the feminine appearance every young man at the time aspires to and there could be no doubt about his upbringing, good food, education, a nanny, loneliness and isolation. And because this is England Orlando would therefore seemed destined to have his portrait on the wall. And his name in the history books. But when he..."

fears around the "loss of significance" in terms of self and subjecthood ("Contingent"). Butler used the critiques of postmodernism as stepping stones to trace how subjects can be mobilized away from regulatory limitations toward understanding the process of representation's exclusionary practices. In that sense, "postmodernism" became a useful catalyst to question the limits of subjection. That is also why I retrospectively make use of this term, as there is still a lot to unpack in terms of why and how these discourses heavily correlated with each other and became unfashionable in time.

Judith Butler mentioned the rhetoric "What happens to materiality if everything is discourse?" which pervaded the postmodernism-critical perspectives in the 1990s. Butler also found sense in the tactic of deconstruction associated with postmodernism: a sense that deconstruction helps mobilize the meanings of terms commonly used to describe certain aspects of the materiality of human bodies, like "sex" (168). Perhaps now we can contextualize the disappearance of the term "postmodern" in relation to such mobilization, as it lost its signifying quality. What is it that postmodernism signified at the time and now is lost? I argue that the trouble lay with representational politics—the struggle to represent macro-level problems with micro-level stories.



"Awkward silences of a failed marriage" (Stacey 12) as an element to highlight the cosmopolitan concept of love that generally refers to either the cold minimalist style of bourgeois home, or an inter-national love that "demands no less than a forgetting of the worlds that formed them" (Stacey 19).









Butler marked the image of the Middle Eastern subject as the ultimate other (during post-September 11) in discussing how the construction of certain subjects in popular U.S. media regulate what those figures signify in order for their image to perpetuate specific oppressive ideologies (160-161). Similarly, Potter made a film, *YES*, that carefully deals with the politics of representation by way of creating an abstract confrontation between the "Middle Eastern other" and the "Western feminist." She made the film precisely as a response to this harmful war-on-terror media rhetoric of the post-September 11 era. And perhaps we can see that this era also marks the weakest point of postmodernism; the counter cinema argument also started to fail in its capacity to address the complexities of fragmented significations at work in mainstream media.

In the next section, I look back at what "political cinema" meant to the counter cinema theories in the 1970s and their connection to the later postmodernist take on identity as a schizophrenic position. I hope to highlight here how the distance between the "signifier" and "signified" in these early theories can be traced through the discussions of a subject's representability in postmodernism. In particular, this is precisely the crisis that Potter visualized in her film *YES* as a



Poster *Le Vent D'est*, translated as "Wind from the East" (1970).

response to contemporary politics.

From counter cinema to postmodernism

In his article "Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent D'est" in 1972 (74), Peter Wollen differentiated through Jean-Luc Godard's work "the seven cardinal virtues" of breaking with Classical Hollywood cinema. The border between counter cinema and Classical Hollywood was quite clearcut in Wollen's theory: the unorthodox juxtapositions and re-contextualizations of film form should lead to a confrontation with cinema's own economic conditions, resulting in the creation of a critical aesthetic, such as Godard's, which describes counter cinema (Wollen 79). These defining features of the critical aesthetic of counter cinema have been revisited by film scholars who coined the term "new media" by looking at the changes in cinema-going cultures. For example, Guiliana Bruno's reading of Ridley Scott's now-more-famous film Blade Runner (1982) "as the metaphor of the postmodern condition" ("Ramble City" 62), shows that cinematic methods of juxtaposition can be adopted by certain Hollywood productions as much as by arthouse. Bruno demonstrates that deconstructive cinematic approaches—especially with regards to subjectivity, selfhood and urban identity-that once were perceived as counter cinema can also be manifested in mainstream films, specifically in the form of post-industrial tech-noir aesthetics and postmodern architecture. Similar perspectives focus on various visual media as cultural documents of the fluctuating consumerist society whose relation to representation constitutes one of the major political concerns since the 1980s (Hutcheon 7-8); and these discussions around the representational methods of the consumerist society continue to engulf categorical discussions around political cinema.[6]

In conjunction with these developments, we saw that deconstructive effects of self-reflexivity, estrangement and reconstruction of reality (the effects Wollen identified as counter cinema virtues) don't solely seem to belong to what is categorically assumed as the avant-garde. This shift towards theories around postmodernism in the discourse of ideology and cinema, perhaps partially if not entirely, blurred the border between counter cinema and the mainstream—a border more clearly visible for Wollen as well as for *Cahiers du Cinema* contributors. As time passes, the relevance of counter cinema terminology can be questioned when it starts to seem redundant—as Steve Cannon did in his article



Cahiers Du Cinema t-shirts can be found online.

on "The Myth of 'Counter Cinema'" where he considers Wollen's approach reductive. But it still remains a strong milestone in film theory, especially for the purpose of uncovering the transitional moments, parallels and detours in the history writing of the politics of cinema.

Even though "political cinema" had a specific meaning, certain ambiguities remained in the counter cinema theories and Cahiers Du Cinema's Marxist film critique. As Colin Perry observes, they aimed to produce "distinct readings of the real" while "both denying and asserting its importance" (Perry 23). Bearing this in mind, the cinematic elements I consider interconnect the ambiguity in depicting reality, identity and the role of ideology. This interconnection runs on the function of the reality effect which assumes "real" subjects through film form, mostly with acting and language. This realism has been also what Cahiers Du Cinema sought to explore in cinema, as well as the concern for postmodernists in relation to the experience of identity. Potter's YES further adds to the discussion of counter cinema a perspective that detours from realism towards representation, and I would first like to contrast this approach with the canonical Cahiers approach to political cinema in the next section. Potter's aesthetic in YES involves a selfreflexive fantasy in terms of resolving political conflict through narrative. In particular, I explore Potter's choice of self-reflexive aesthetics and artificiality in this film-a product of how September 11 affected the filmmaker and the world, as she stated that "the destruction of the World Trade Center and its aftermath of suspicion and vengeance inspired her film" (Garrett).

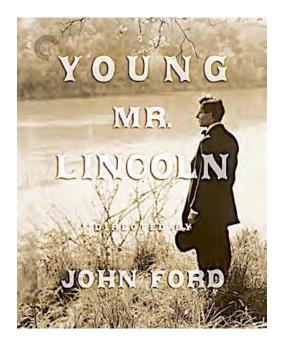
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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* was in the center of the discussions around the role of ideology and "structuring absences" in Kleinhans' words (Criterion Collection poster).

Revisiting Cahiers Du Cinema

In "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (one of the most cited texts in film politics), Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni describe seven categories of films according to the political nature of the cinematic engagement that a film can have with its own status as an agent of ideology. The authors then regroup the categories to lay out the films' levels of critical functions by the ways in which the films tend to criticise their own commodification through form. Briefly, the first grouping refers to films completely integrated into the dominant ideology, hence oblivious to their status as a commercial product. The groups that interest Comolli and Narboni are the rest of the categories.

The authors differentiate films involving a political meaning directly or indirectly, or on the level of form and subject. These films seem to be the ones that offer a potentially radical practice to work within the doomed status of cinema as a hegemonic industry. For example, the second "political cinema" group is comprised of films that point to their political status both on the level of their film form and their subject matter—the former level is referred as "signifier" and the latter as "signified" (Comolli and Narboni 26). [open references and endnotes in new window] The third group involves films "that should be the chief subject of the magazine [Cahiers du Cinema]" due to their subtle politics that eschew the notion of realism. According to Comolli and Narboni, films in the third category don't necessarily attack the dominant ideology by striving to represent ideological struggle directly on screen; they do it by their politically-clinched aesthetic choices on the level of form-Ingmar Bergman's Persona (1966) being one example. This group thus constitutes "the essential of cinema" without a commitment to depict reality. The fourth group categorizes films that convey political content on the narrative level but still remain within the regulated territory of dominant ideology that designates the limits of political expression. The fifth marks the films with certain powerful aesthetics—like genre films—in which ideology becomes "subordinate to the text" (Comolli and Narboni 27). While the films in the sixth category document the real-life events of struggle (i.e. documentaries on working class, political protests and social movements) but don't point back to their own role in ideology as documentaries, the films in the seventh (and last) category are about, again "live action," but this time they underline the film's position as the documenting agent. These films, similar to the films in the second and third categories, are "not satisfied with the idea of the camera 'seeing through appearances'" (Comolli and Narboni 28).

Comolli and Narboni's categorization has been formative in terms of contextualizing the discussions around how to understand and create political cinema, perhaps due to the importance of realism in this formulation. This can be also due to the explicitly-defined-ness of these categories and the pronounced differentiation between the political and non-political in their theories. However, these categories also seem to run the risk of reducing radicalism to rejection of realism when this discussion comes to the more blurred contexts of avant-garde cinema, such as collage, ironic symbolism, citationality and parody. But such concepts can both work as a tool to obscure the "ideologically-conditioned method of 'depiction'" (Comolli and Narboni 28) and as a self-aware method of providing alienation and discomfort in the consumption process.



The overhead shot from the opening sequence of *The Tango Lesson* first depicts Potter herself cleaning a table, then her positioning the white paper and pen and finally writing the word "rage" on the paper (which is going to be thrown away). The sequence centralizes the crisis of representation from the start; from the black and white overhead to the close-up to the hand as well as the jump cuts to what is being written in colour, ultimately position Potter's own creative process as the point of questionability in terms of the so-called representation at hand.

Chuck Kleinhans detects this reading ideology in *Cahiers* based on a concept called "structuring absence" in cinema—a concept that "opens up analysis to not just mimicking or mirroring what a film says overtly, but to looking for that which it cannot address" (2). Even though Kleinhans' project is to reveal the contradictions in *Cahiers Du Cinema*'s "reading ideology" regarding *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939), his critical re-evaluation nonetheless traces some of *Cahiers*' theoretical contributions that can still be useful for us. According to Kleinhans, the concept of "structuring absence" ("something that signifies although it is not present") is one of the most influential ideas they produced. Comolli and Narboni's text, based on *Cahiers*' conceptualizations that Kleinhans dissected, laid the foundations of the discourse around counter cinema. On the other hand, it revealed possible contradictions in believing the tangibility of classification methods. Thus, according to Barbara Klinger:

"the strong critical investment in designating and elucidating counteror progressive cinema is financed through a staunch conception of classic textuality, against which progressive practice relies for its very definition" (Klinger 33).

Klinger's standpoint, in this regard, works towards recognizing progressive art not only in terms of a text's singularity but also in a more collective sense, such as can be found in the trajectory of genre films. She further points out that this classification influenced questions of authorship. Drawing from Klinger, we can find a similar collective sense in Sally Potter's cinema in terms of playing with the tools of identity representations. The distinctive filmmaking choices in *YES* particularly use language and self-reflexivity to offer an intervention into the methods of realistic representation on screen, which then responds to the discussion around political cinema associated with the counter cinema discourse. Re-constructing reality was one of the criteria in differentiating counter cinema in Film Studies in the 1960s and 1970s (as can be seen in Comolli and Narboni's work that followed André Bazin's legacy). The critical positions towards the concept of realism within postmodernist thought went one step forward and questioned the singularity of reality, especially in "the age of digital media" where



Note that this word comes back as a film title later in Potter's oeuvre, see *RAGE* (2009).



Sally Potter

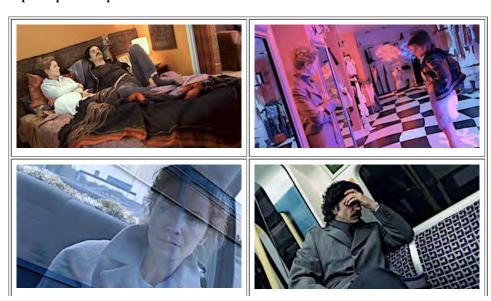
Catherine Fowler

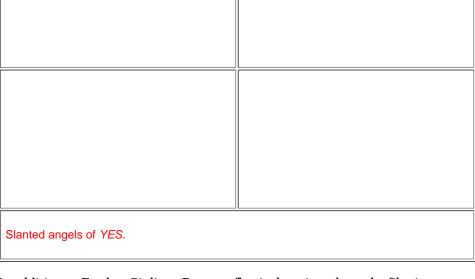
Catherine Fowler's 2008 book on Sally Potter.

"the real me" is perpetually getting lost and refurbished (McRobbie 434, Poster 445). This paradigmatic move away from singularity in terms of the concept of reality made it hard to stick with "the essentialist notions of the self that suggest there is a natural, unified and hidden essence to the self." This perspective has also mobilized art-house filmmaking into using deconstructionist approaches to representing identity, derived from the limitations of mainstream representation, for which Potter's YES can be given as an example. In Potter's filmmaking, representation comes across as a self-reflexively "emptying" method that emphasizes the constructed-ness of identity traits and societal pressures. I argue that this filmmaking constitutes a problem for realism-oriented perspectives and displaces the role of realism in political position-taking in cinema. Instead, it uses a type of cinematic scaffolding that surrounds the narrative to highlight fantastical connections between its fragments.

YES and structuring absences

Catherine Fowler detects how camera movements create "distortions of perspective" in YES and the film has a certain symbolism carried through the adoption of a specific poetic language (98-100). The narrative structure of YES revolves around the generic arc of a love affair (meeting, falling in love, conflict and/or separation, resolution and/or getting back together) between an Irish-American microbiologist (Joan Allen) who unhappily leads a bourgeois married life and a Lebanese chef (Simon Abkarian) who worked as a surgeon in Beirut before he migrated to London where he cannot practice his profession due to his immigrant status. However, this structure's linearity is constantly fractured by self-reflexive compositions, such as double exposure and slow motion (among other features). Fowler delves into how the cinematic implementation of Potter's love story constructs "artificial" representations of cultural and political dichotomies—including the gender binary, the rich and the poor, and the cultural war between "the West" and "the East." Even though Fowler doesn't directly compare the film with the politics of counter cinema, her focus is still on how politically-defined the protagonists are in the film; their dialogues mostly directly express political positions.





In addition to Fowler, Giuliana Bruno reflectively writes about the film in a very unusual form: a personal letter to Sally Potter, which can be found in *Journal of Visual Culture*; Bruno discusses *YES* in relation to her own personal engagement with the film blended into her critical reading. The reviewer's choice of leaving the practice of textual analysis out of her personal-critical account is a sign of film's resistance against textuality-focused approaches that try to pinpoint any realism in cinematic construction. Based on these writers' accounts, we see that the film invites thinking about cultural dichotomies beyond issues of how to represent reality through the so-called integrity of textuality. Rather, the film engages with disintegration of textuality by its way of articulating the methods of surveillance, language, formatting, restriction and formula—which can be easily associated with Wollen's "cardinal virtues" of counter cinema.



Cleaner's first appearance.

From the beginning of the film, we find a congruence between counter cinema discourse and *YES*. Counter cinema insisted on looking at the ways in which hegemonic structures at work are rendered invisible by the film industry, and the cinematographic choices in *YES* seek to expose what would be hidden elsewhere. The first instance of this is the film's opening: a microscopic image of dust particles move across the image when the film title appears on screen. Then we see someone who is not necessarily the protagonist of the film, Cleaner (Shirley Handerson), who is the maid of the house where the female protagonist lives with her family. Cleaner's poetic monologue on the role of dust and dirt with regards to their signifying function in terms of how a life is lived starts the film with the idea



Opening sequence.

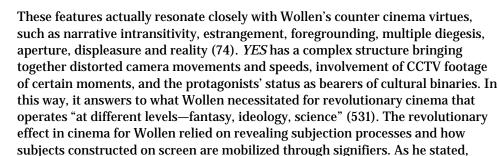
of accumulated knowledge through residues; this signals the organizing function of Cleaner in the narrative structure. Then, in turn, the role of Cleaner signals the invisible organizational role of social class. This invisible role can be associated with what Kleinhans called "the structuring absences" within the methods of narrativizing life which is at the core of the system of mainstream representation: what cannot be visible on screen is ultimately what organizes what can be visible there. In contrast to this system, Cleaner's positionality in the film lays bare this structuration—what I call the outer scaffolding of the narrative. We can think about all the cinematic aspects that are touched upon in the rest of this article as the features of this structure in YES. As the definition of "scaffolding" signifies, [7] this visible structure presumably is temporally located, yet integral to the narrative's grounded-ness and maintenance by completely enclosing it. The analogy for the relationship between "the West" and "the East" in the form of a heterosexual love affair arc then relies upon the support from this cinematic scaffolding that includes Cleaner's unveiling function in the film in terms of "structuring absences." She holds the position of the Greek chorus in tragedy who tells the audience the context within which the whole story should be understood (Fischer).[8]



First encounter.

Some of the other features of this structure are

- the use of iambic parameter (to underline the role of language in representation).
- CCTV surveillance footage (to provide an added suspicion to the protagonists' relationship),
- skewed camera angles and blurred visuals that trivialize the central subjects and
- the presence of the other cleaners who don't speak, unlike Cleaner, but only
 are inserted into the foreground of the frames between narrativelymotivated scene changes to disrupt a potential seamlessness in the film's
 temporality.





SHE gives HIM her number on a piece of paper – an added formatting of the moment here as "suspicious activity" with CCTV footage.

"the articulation of these levels, which involves different modes of discourse and different positions of the subject, is a complicated matter" (531).

I argue that the image of scaffolding here helps to explain this "complicated matter." It gives the spectators access to demystifing how the levels of fantasy, science and cinema rely upon "structuring absences" by way of a heightened self-reflexivity. As such, Potter's YES both constructs the fantasy of the love affair between "the East" and "the West" and displays the tools of such fantasizing activity. It does so first and foremost by way of starting the film with a moving image that is only viewable through a scientific tool (microscope) that displays the fragments of any so-called uniformity. Hence, the illusion of uniformity in terms of the coupling of "the East" and "the West" is dispelled from the start by the reminders of this cinematic scaffolding around the narrative that also includes this microscoping effect.



SHE is looking through her microscope.



SHE at her work place on the phone with HE.



HE at his work place from the CCTV footage.



HE is performing his traditional Labanese dancing for SHE before and the moment of transition through the feet match cut to HER daughter's shoes.

The signifiers of "the East" and "the West," as well as the relationship between them ("the love affair") can be found in the film, but that is all there is since, without the scaffolding, there is no structure to the "signified." In that sense, YES can also be taken as what happened to the significance of postmodernism that used to serve as the potential melting pot of identities, offering a hopeful paradigm for marginalized identities to be integrated into society on an equal ground shared with the ruling classes. This is why Jackie Stacey discussed the film as an articulation of a paradoxical cosmopolitanism that both wishes for and fails at realizing the cosmopolitan match of "the Eastern immigrant" and "the Western feminist." This paradoxicality was welcomed within the paradigm of postmodernism, and in that sense, Stacey' article can be taken as another sign of the communication between YES and this paradigm through a cinematic exploration of its loss.

Another element that constitutes the backbone of this communication is the lack of character development in the construction of protagonists. This congruence between the loss of character significance in *YES* and the loss of significance of postmodernism might be better understood once we look at the use of language in the film as this is the tool it uses to rule out characterization, hence realistic representation. In all this, I don't mean to say the acting is not realistic, on the contrary the realistic acting through language becomes conceptualized as an agent of fantasy about a realism that is actually not there.



HE outside of his work place by the trash on the phone with SHE (another "background" space being emphasized and associated with his residual status as an immigrant).



HE in public transportation is a moment in the film that marks the identity-related differences between HE and SHE.

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Cleaner, again, breaking the forth wall and being in the foreground of a dramatic scene that does not involve her.

The politics of language

All the monologues and dialogues in YES are written in iambic pentameter[9] [open endnotes and references in new window] reminding us of the artificiality of written text. This creates a sense of estrangement and unpleasure (the Brechtian elements of counter cinema according to Wollen) as it reminds us of how language is constructed, thus how self-expression is not free from social construct. Wollen proceeds by explaining Godard's obsession "with the true speech, lying speech and theatrical speech"—while making a remark on how speech is not independent from the class content, i.e., "the bourgeoisie lies." In this way Wollen emphasizes how actors and actresses' act of embodiment of other people should be "distrusted for speaking other people's words as if they were their own" (81). Hence counter cinema, in light of Godard, marks "the impossibility of genuine dialog and the reduction of dialog to reciprocal—or often unilateral—interviewing" (81).

The two protagonists, HE and SHE, in YES have no names, they only reproduce their social positions within their gender, ethnicity and class matrix. When these protagonists are differentiated solely by their pronouns, what is emphasized in the final moment of ending credits is their status of interpellation through gender-based language. Sally Potter sets them apart by the language of gender binary, stripping them off of any character but merely representations of their social status. This language makes bare the repressing structures, mainly the heterosexual imperative, that Cahiers Du Cinema writersdetected in Classical Hollywood. Potter's method of not-naming the protagonists and setting scenes that are filled with cliché gestures of foreplay (which I take as a reference to the graphic-less acts of sex metaphors and Hays code in early Hollywood) as well as making them talk in an overbearingly poetic manner unearths the language of Classical Hollywood and its "structuring absences"—"things that are repressed [...] particularly politics and sexuality" (Kleinhans).



SHE and her daughter Grace at the pool where a cleaner is being in the foreground.

Furthermore, there is another aspect to Cleaner (Shirley Henderson); she always looks at the camera while performing monologues about how "the truth" about

human life can be learned through the dirt people leave behind. Cleaner conducts the temporality ("scaffolding") of the film—starts the film, disrupts the drama and ends the film—all the while staring directly into the eyes of the spectator through the camera when she makes social and philosophical commentary on human life. As observed by Bruno,

"the performative position of the cleaner also echoes the 'silent' voice of the analyst. Such is a voice that can itself act as a projection of one's own inner voice" ("It's About Time" 32).

Ascribing an analyst role to the invisible organizational function of a housemaid, whose existence on screen has commonly been used to depict the reality of class difference, Sally Potter emphasizes what is classically in the background: ideological positioning of the working class. Throughout the film, it is not only Cleaner who looks at the camera, all the cleaners in the various locations of the film-house, hospital, laboratory (the workplace of SHE)-turn around at some point of a scene where some dramatic moment happens, and look at the camera, making themselves visible in a dramatic context that doesn't directly involve them. The self-reflexive effect of looking at a camera may not be the most uncommon method for the effect of alienation. However, Cleaner (or cleaners) doesn't reflect on their own position as working class directly while playing the role of an intellectual "analyst," which again further strips off Cleaner having some sort of a self. Her reflexivity is an activator of the cinematic visibility of an ideological representation. It doesn't reflect back on her character as a workingclass person in the film's world, nor her own development as a character with subjectivity. In that sense, this role of an activator is similar to how Bruno reads the replicants in the world of *Blade Runner* as having a schizophrenic condition. She explains the temporality of a replicant:

"the experience of temporality and its representation are an effect of



Harrison Ford as Roy in Blade Runner.



Joan Allen as SHE in YES.

language. It is the very structure of language that allows us to know temporality as we do and to represent it as a linear development. [...] Schizophrenia, [...] results from a failure to enter to Symbolic Order; it is thus essentially a breakdown of language, which contributes to a breakdown of temporal order. The schizophrenic condition is characterized by the inability to experience the persistence of 'I' over time." ("Ramble City" 70)

Cleaner, SHE and HE: these protagonists are constituted by the intersections of certain socio-cultural elements that are temporally ordered. HE is an immigrant, SHE is a grandmother as well as a scientist and a traveller, Cleaner is only seen during the activity of cleaning (except the ending). All are speaking with the same set of rules and rhythm to regulate their spoken language that doesn't belong to their own subjective history, but to a non-diegetic world of literary tradition. These people are artificial, without character, connected to an outer language. All these features—not being a representation of a character, but being stripped off from a historical existence while having a body of a person—connect them closely with what was called the schizophrenic condition of postmodern existence. These protagonists don't speak for other people, they speak for their positions, in a specific language and a rhythm that unifies them.



SHE at a work meeting.

Fowler observes this as "perspective being played around" (Fowler 101). The construction of the perspective is another point that *YES* brings to the fore through the use of language and camera. As Giuliana Bruno elegantly expresses this in her "letter" to Sally Potter:

"In your film the rhythm of the language stays constant, while the visuals and everything else move constantly. But the semantic rhythm is steady, not static. In the face of the gender and ethnic wars that the film represents, the poetic pattern represents a form of containment. Only such a recognizable linguistic structure would be able to safely contain the self at war, to 'hold' psychic trauma. The structure of the verse enables the saying of what could not otherwise be said, the naming of what could not otherwise even have a name" ("It's About Time" 31)





Fight / break up.

The "self" that Bruno mentions doesn't refer to how protagonists construct a "self." On the contrary, Bruno underlines how they foreground the experiential condition of having a "self." They are able to "say what could not otherwise be said" precisely because they don't represent the "real" conditions of exchange of self-expression in personal encounters. For instance, when the "Eastern" HE wants to stop seeing the "Western" SHE, they start an initially calm argument that turns into a heated back-and-forth fight, he says:

"It's you, your people feel superior you want to rule, you want to spoil you want our land, you want our oil you call that civilized Your country is a dragon breathing flames Land of corporate fantasies, brand names, big mac, big burger, yes big everything" (Potter)

As evident in this passage, HE is not personal, they are not personal: they reproduce the ideological concepts that are actually what is left behind when "personal" is taken out of the formula of a social encounter within the cultural matrix.

Or so Ms. Potter would have us believe. But really, the main obstacle facing them is the director's dogmatic belief that human beings exist mainly, if not solely, as accretions of identity. Another way to say this is to observe that "Yes," a movie that proudly (if lazily) flies the flag of tolerance and cosmopolitanism, consists of nothing but stereotypes. He, with his long mustache and expressive hands, is a figure out of a threadbare Orientalist carpet: florid of speech, emotionally volatile, oscillating wildly between pride and self-pity. She is the embodiment of chilly Western rationality, and the twain can only meet in bed. Or on the beach in Cuba, which turns out to be the only place in the world free from the frigid materialism of the developed world and the blood hatreds of the Middle East. (Well, maybe North Korea too, but the climate there is not as pleasant.)

A. O. Scott's review of YES in the New York Times recognizes that the film does not depict "real" characters but only stereotypical expressionisms, arguing that the film "flies a flag of tolerance" despite the film's irony exactly around such flagging points.

"The impossibility of genuine dialogue" marks acting as another platform for ideology to obscure the tools of cultural production; this was one of the main things that should be problematized in cinema for Godard. In *YES*, Potter also eschews attaching a subjective "self" to the subjects of communication at hand, but she then attaches subjectivity instead to a counter-ideology that attacks the colonial-capitalist mind. The protagonists speak the words of their socio-cultural positions in a way that their conversation at times becomes a war between sexes,

other times a fantastical unity of "the East" and "the West." While the words of sex and romance are unifying, the words of class and ethnicity are discriminating. Therefore, the poetic language in the film, by precisely indicating its constructedness, demonstrates a method of political cinema where the struggle with representation in terms of gender, class and ethnicity is articulated only through a set of rules (iambic pentameter) on the level of spoken language.

Instead of trying to depict a genuine dialogue and romanticism of unity between such subjects, the film squeezes the promises and the words of "shared ground of love and healing" into an imposed closed-circuit language play—that is the iambic pentameter that roots from the early English history (and inevitably carries with itself its colonial connotations). This use of language in the film then makes the default invisibility of English being the "universal" language visible, and that HEhad to learn English for the fantasy of unity to emerge. As Dave Lucas writes, the history of iambic pentameter originates from the European colonialist effort to elevate Latin as superior to the spoken English; this marks "the troubling element of the history of pentameter and English—the function of conquest, colonization, and subjugation" ("The Deep History"). The language in YES is also an imposition that makes the cosmopolitan pairing possible in the first place, through which the representational promises ingrained in the narratives of love are parodied. This is what Jackie Stacey called "a liminal space between dystopia and utopia" (32) in YES – the possibility of healing resides in its utopic images of equal ground and the possibility of change resides in its dystopic images of surveillance and racism.

Film

'People were more afraid of the poetry'

Sally Potter's east-meets-west movie features an English pot-washer hurling abuse at 'Arab bombers'. Did such topicality worry its backers? No - but the rhyming dialogue got them really scared. Duncan Campbell reports

Duncan Campbell

Fri 29 Jul 2005 01.04 BST

There's some sensationalist wording in the *Guardian* review to describe *YES*' plot, similar to the *NY Times* review, giving in to the stereotypical language that the film directly engages with.

The leftism of *YES* both seems possible yet fantastical with regard to a "love affair" as well as an achievement of political unity. As I mentioned earlier, we find an easing of this type of paradoxicality in what has been described as postmodernist cinema. The cinematic spectacles of heterosexual love, bourgeois depression and unbinding catharsis strove to transcend the restriction of language in quite a number of mainstream pre-September-11 American cinema among which we can count *Magnolia* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999)or *American Beauty* (1999). However, *YES* resists such postmodernist aesthetic of slightly-optimistic catharsis which can be associated with what Jackie Stacey called the "cosmopolitan cure". As Butler made it clear at the time, whatever was useful in postmodernism wasn't necessarily a utopic transcendence of meaning, but the





SHE at the hospital by her Irish aunt in Belfast before her death.

potential to resist the imposition of signification methods, such as media rhetoric and stereotypes, by way of revealing what they try to hide (i.e. classism and racism).

Here in this context, I argue that the postmodern rejection of "the possibility of presuppositionless representation" (Agger 117) proved unhelpful since the transitional moment in politics of representation marked by September-11 (this rejection was sort of favoured as a method to de-universalize knowledge and recognize difference, for example by Ben Agger). Such as the Middle Eastern subjects in Western media since the early 2000s, the multiplication of subject positions through representation started to coalesce around the concept of terrorism and refer to emptied out signifiers (take for example, TV shows like Homeland or The Night Manager). Once there exists such dominant signifiers that move away from what they signify (i.e. actual subjects from "the Middle East") and become empty shells of political distraught of the Western world, then the optimistic aspects of the postmodernist paradigm (that is, for marginalized identities) become harder to associate with the revelation of "structuring absences" in media. And for that matter, revolutionary cinema. Yes, YES underlines the impossibility of representing the "real" experience of self like a true postmodern text. Nonetheless, it still lays bare how this paradigm of "no real self but only context" can serve some of the dominant ideological positions that use the clichés of colonial language (the black-ish humor of SHE can be a reference to that). The film shows that the fantasies of interracial heterosexual love narratives that involve the concept of immigration in the background lack an engagement with how these subjects are actually signified in the systems of media representation.

According to Comolli and Narboni, cinema can become politicized by pointing back to their level of ideological integration: criticising films should present

"a rigidly factual analysis of what governs the production of film (economic circumstances, ideology, demand and purpose) and the meanings and forms appearing in it, which are equally tangible" (28).

They also determine the main role of a radical filmmaker:

"the film-maker's first task is to show up the cinema's so-called 'depiction of reality'" (25).

All these features could be sought in approaching YES in the textual analysis tradition that would probably satisfy the requirements of a "rigid practice" according to the guidelines of Comolli and Narboni. However, the film's critical comprehension might end up being quite nullifying, considering how impossible it would be to determine what governed the multiplied and detoured meanings appearing in YES as they are not tangible in the same way as the film's production conditions. We know that Sally Potter wrote YES as a response to September 11 (Bruno, "It's About Time" 30), but what it ended up responding to was how to tackle the gap between self and other. With regards to this background information, the sensibility and conceptualization of YES can be seen as a political reaction that finds it hard to locate itself in one perspective, but prefers to make its central political analogy (the love affair between "the East" and "the West") subject to instability and mobilization. My contention is that this mobile political reaction provides an example of how counter cinema can be reformed on screen and enforces a different approach to a postmodern perspective that can reevaluate counter cinema's earlier, more rigid versions. In doing so, the discourse of counter cinema will not have to ease paradoxes for the sake of categorizations, rather its function can become an assessment of representational politics.

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Notes

- 1. One of the intersections of these two Western discourses was embodied by the formation of London Film-makers' Co-op in 1966 which promoted self-reflexivity and formal innovation over narrative in their experimental-theoretical films. The two exemplary productions of this formation are *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) co-created by film theorists Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. At this intersection, we find the theoretical trajectory of the Frankfurt School, spanning French poststructuralist ideas around femininity and identity, as well as avant-gardist film journal *Cahiers Du Cinema* whose influence will be mentioned more in detail later within this context. [return to page 1]
- 2. See for example Angela McRobbie's expansive exploration of what postmodernism offered for feminism, cultural theory and identity politics in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994).
- 3. See for a few examples since 2000: Catherine Fowler's book *Sally Potter* (2008); the chapter "On the Edges of Art Cinema: Sally Potter and the Feminist Response" in Sharon Lin Tay's book *Women on the Edge* (2009); Lisa Fischer's article on the journey of the deconstructivist theories around sexual difference within feminist film theory in relation to Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (2004).
- 4. One of the earliest positionings of *Thriller* as an "avant-garde theory film" was put forward by E. Ann Kaplan who aligned the film with *Sigmund Freud's Dora* (1979) and Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Amy!* (1980) in terms of their shared psychoanalytical references. Similar to counter cinema theorists' shared argument about how political cinema has to reflect back on its own production, Kaplan situates *Thriller* among the other "avant-garde theory films that draw attention to their own cinematic processes, making us aware of their construction and of the fact that we are watching a film" (143).
- 5. These well-studied debates involved a variety of dialogues in the 1970s moving into the 1980s, intersecting psychoanalysis, Marxism and feminism, between film scholars in the UK and USA, including Pam Cook, Claire Johnston, Tania Modleski and E. Ann Kaplan among others. For a summary of these discussions, see again Lucy Fischer's article on *The Tango Lesson* (44-46). Also Kaplan's critical response to Cook and Johnston's shared position on the functionality of Hollywood representation in terms of women's movement has an overviewing purpose: "Aspects of British feminist film theory: A critical evaluation of texts by Claire Johnston and Pam Cook" published in *Jump Cut* in 1974: http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/jc12-13folder/britfemtheory.html
- 6. For a more specific discussion of how the field Film Studies has been affected by the larger cultural theories around postmodernism, especially in light of Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation and simulacra and Frederic Jameson's writings on postmodern shifts in consumer society, see Catherine Constable's 2004 article "Postmodernism in Film" and her later book *Postmodernism and*

Film: Rethinking Hollywood's Aesthetics published in 2015.

- 7. The definition of "scaffolding" in Oxford Languages: "a temporary structure on the outside of a building, made of wooden planks and metal poles, used by workmen while building, repairing, or cleaning the building."
- 8. As Jackie Stacey states: "Like the chorus in Greek tragedy or the fool in Shakespeare, the Cleaner provides an omniscient view on the diegetic world as though from the vantage point of cosmos" (12-13). The traditional role of Greek chorus as the narrativizing agent is arguably replaced by the role of the omniscient narrator in mainstream cinema. In that sense, we find an agent of classical narration in *YES* albeit the heavily self-reflexive tone of the film which is typically associated with digital era and the concept of hybridity in postmodern texts.
- 9. The historical context from which the iambic pentameter emerges is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note that Sally Potter's choice of using this traditional poetics (combined with the Greek chorus) can lead to further studies not limited to counter cinema and can be explored in the context of the adoptions of early forms of English literature in cinema. Another filmmaker that immediately comes to mind being Derek Jarman. [return to page 3]

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Representations of labor in cinema: Skvirsky's *The Process Genre* reveals that which was always there.

review by Sam Smucker

Skvirsky, Salomé Aguilera. *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor*. Duke University Press, 2020.

Harun Farocki explains in his insightful article about his short film *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) that

"films about work or workers have not become one of the main genres... Most narrative films take place in that part of life where work has been left behind."[1][open endnotes in new page]

The result it seems is that few scholars have attempted to theorize systematically the relationship between the world of work and media. When they do, generally speaking, they read media for its relationship to realistic depictions, as representations that conform to or vary from reality in particular ways, and because of that, inform us about work or culture. For instance, Ewa Mazierska's excellent edited volume on work and cinema attempts to map these representations in various ways, stretching what is understood as work or its depiction, and frequently contrasting them with the realities of capitalism or neoliberalism.[2]

In contrast to these approaches, Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky's ambitious and compelling new book *The Process Genre* challenges us to re-think the relationship between labor and cinema. Instead of starting from the point of view of realism, she analyzes a cinematic phenomenon she calls the process genre, which is rooted in the formal characteristics of and spectatorial reactions to a particular kind of presentation of labor. This approach yields revelations about how filmmakers depict labor across a wide variety of media, the way these depictions are utilized by political actors, and their ideological effects. Her insights suggest that attending closely to formal qualities of media is methodologically critical for developing theoretical perspectives. It is this move, starting from the point of view of formal qualities of the depiction of work, that allows Skvirsky to decenter indexicality for questions of the social and political nature of this representational mode.

The Process Genre is compelling in its argument because it mobilizes a myriad of transmedial examples to illustrate its claims. I found it impossible to read a chapter without watching the often mesmerizing or amusing video references. Skvirksy is doing serious theoretical work as she develops an apparatus to analyze



Nanook creates an ice window for his igloo. Nanook of the North (1922) is one of Skvirsky's iconic examples of a process genre film.

examples of labor in the media. Such a project is ambitious and revelatory enough, but Skvirsky proposes nothing less than a film genre. It is that kind of bold claim that keeps you on your toes throughout, making this inspired book a pleasure to read.

Skvirsky defines the process genre as a particular kind of representation of labor. The process genre is

"the sequentially ordered representation of someone making or doing something.... The represented processes are typically, though not always, processes of production, and crucially, they are represented as having a sequentially ordered series of steps with a clearly identifiable beginning, middle, and end." (2)

The genre's formal qualities include the display of "successive steps or phases of a process" which produces "a surprising degree of absorption in the spectator." (15) Human labor is central to this definition as the genre produces a "sensuous encounter of the human body, instruments and materials." Finally, the genre conveys to the spectator the "impression of having provided —knowledge about the world." (15) An example of the process genre might consist of an entire film focused on a single process like a video on industrial production (as in *A Visit to Peek Frean and Co.'s Biscuit Works* (1906)) or it might present multiple unrelated processes (such as in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) or *Nanook of the North* (1922)), or it might be a narrative film in which process is given a small amount of screen time yet serves as the "thematic center of the film" (such as in films like *Rififi* (1955) or *Pickpocket* (1975)). (16) The five films above serve as her canonical examples and she uses them in the following chapters, to demonstrates the genre's unique affectivity, its mechanism of aestheticization, and its social and historical impacts.

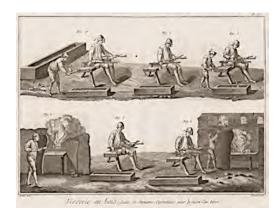


Jeanne Deilman (1975) consists of multiple process sequences including a 5-minute scene in which the protagonist prepares veal cutlets.	

Watch excerpts of the book's iconic examples of the process genre film.

- A Visit to Peek Frean and Co.'s Biscuit Works (1906)
- Nanook of the North (1922) ("How to Build an Igloo")
- Pickpocket (1975) Excerpt
- Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) ("Jean Dielman—Veal Cutlets")

Skvirsky argues that the process genre encompasses far more than feature films. Perhaps its most robust contemporary representations are found in instructional how-to videos on YouTube and reality television shows such as *Top Chef* (2006 —) or *Fixer Upper* (2013-2018). (3) She gives us examples across the subgenres of

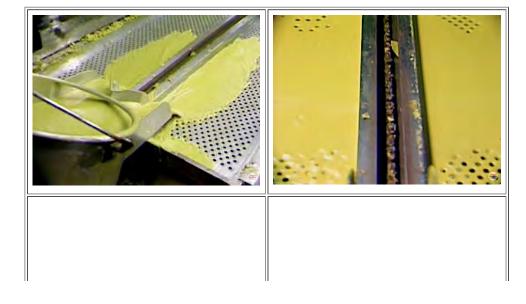


The process genre has its roots in Renaissance visual manuals such as Diderot and d'Alembert's Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers.

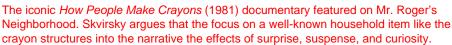
educational, industrial, and ethnographic films from early cinema but also observational documentaries like Frederick Wiseman's Meat (1976), art cinema like A Man Escaped (1956), slow cinema like La Libertad (2001), and Edweard Muybridge's chromophotographic motion studies. The process genre is transmedial, although Skvirsky argues it finds its fullest form in cinema. Yet, it's visible in Renaissance visual manuals such as Diderot and d'Alembert's Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers (Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts (1751-72)), craft demonstrations at museums and fairs, as well as the modern corollary of the airplane safety manual and IKEA assembly instructions. She introduces counter-examples to demonstrate the formative qualities that give the genre its aesthetic and thematic power. While reading her book, I found myself testing her definition against my own set of examples, including contemporary heist films such as Ocean's Eleven (2001), which seems like it would easily fit her genre category. The Queen's Gambit (2020) series seems to resist its potential for processual representation probably because producers wanted the series to appeal to people who don't know how to play chess. Finally, I wondered about the processual nature of live video game streaming on platforms like Twitch.

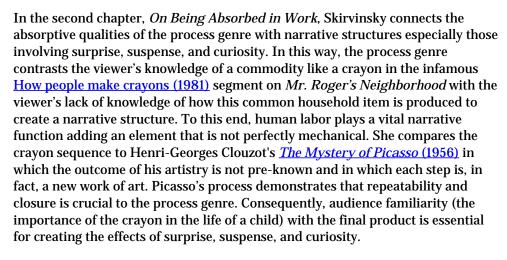
Skvirsky claims that the process genre, while transmedial, finds purchase in visual media because it so elegantly displays its two critical attributes—visual representation and sequentiality; images and duration. This leads Skvirsky into a discussion of the process film as a genre and the depiction of labor and technique as one of its central characteristics. This is a topic I will return to at the end of this review, as the pleasure of wrestling with her bold claim of discovering a new genre and the its relationship to work deserves more space. However, I want to give the reader a sense of her entire argument in the chapters.

In the first chapter, *The Process Film in Context*, Skvirsky traces the history of the process film from the early days of cinema; it is connected to, although not synonymous with, industrial, educational, and ethnographic films. Her contention, though, is that "processual syntax" was developed much earlier than film as a medium, a product of the early modern period and utilized to standardize practical knowledge for "growing, urbanizing, modernizing societies" such as Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. (76) In the 19th century, it's adapted for the display of crafts and machinery at large public fairs and exhibitions. Consequently, "processual syntax was already available to be adapted by the film medium." (65)









In the third chapter, *Aestheticizing Labor*, Skvirsky argues that process syntax centers on two essential elements: the skillful execution of technique and physical (concrete) labor. The aestheticization of work in the process genre takes on an aura of magic which contrasts the difficulty of the feat accomplished with its depiction as ease. This perspective generates two kinds of "worries," which she uses as the axis of the chapter: first, she asks, is the process genre indelibly linked







Unlike the crayon sequence, Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Mystery of Picasso* (1956) features Picasso creating a previously unknown piece of art, demonstrating that repeatability and closure is crucial to the process genre.

historically to Taylorism? and secondly, is one of its most important effects to separate toil from work? Her answer to these questions is a cautious No. She invokes the idea of a "metaphysics of labor," which functions as a "shorthand phrase used to characterize the view that a flourishing human life has labor—capaciously understood—at its center. The metaphysics of labor opposes the idea that (transhistorically) the truth of labor is toil." (121) This idea serves to push against linking process syntax with just one kind of production: the Taylorist organization of early 19th century capitalism. In one of the more tenuous lines of her argument, she attempts to re-read the decentering of labor (for instance, depictions of hands but not faces) as dehumanizing. Instead, she proposes that reading is just one of many possible interpretations.

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Skvirsky argues that techniques work to center labor and uses Chantal Akerman's *Saute Ma Ville* (1971) as a counter-example, displaying labor without technique.

Skvirsky is attempting to push against critiques from leftists like Harun Farocki and Jean-Louis Comolli which suggest that cinema misrepresents the true nature of work both by displacing it and showing it as unrealistic, as not toilsome. By their argument, it is easy to see why the genre has been associated with the political right—it makes alienated labor disappear or look good. Her counter reading is to recenter labor showing how the process genre presents labor as technique, a social practice of executing accumulated knowledge. Techniques tie together human labor and material elements to achieves some material goal—which implicitly requires and recenters labor. She illustrates this with an especially enjoyable section on depictions of labor without technique including amusing examples like the WunderTütenFabrik's *The Most Unsatisfying Video in the World Ever Made* (2017) and Chantal Akerman's *Saute Ma Ville* (1971).

By centering labor and technique, the process genre makes Taylorist processes seem more artisanal and tends to reveal labor as inherently valuable. "The metaphysics of labor" position critiques the idea that the toil of factory work is the model for all work. Her discussion of commodity fetishism, a discussion that one anticipates from the first pages, is then counter-intuitive. She asks what does it actually mean to conceal labor? She argues that to suggest that it is done by the removal of human imperfection runs against notions of artisanal precision. Her point is that representations of efficiency in production do not make the process genre "inherently Taylorist." (135) She argues that by revealing labor, the process genre acknowledges the labor theory of value through its representation of concrete labor (physical labor), consequently expressing the hidden source of value (socially necessary labor time).

The aestheticization of labor by way of its presentation as an artisanal technique performed with ease makes it susceptible to a nostalgic and utopian cooptation by productivists on both the left and the right. Her argument is that this framework sets up an ideological division at variance with the typical left/right split on the question of work. Instead, the process genre reveals a divide between productivists (capitalist and socialists) on the one hand and anti-work impulses from right restorationists (one might imagine craft-focused nostalgia) and left anti-industrial anarchists. If this productivist impulse itself seems anachronistic, it likely suggests how out of step it is with modern digital capitalism.

In Chapter 4, *Nation Building*, Skvirsky looks at the deployment of the process film in conjunction with national myth-making. She acknowledges that process syntax has been used in industrial films to connect the national project with technological and economic development. It also has an ethnographic history that narrativizes nationality as a succession of developmental stages, often positing rudimentary craft production as an antecedent form of life, suggesting a unidirectional cultural and social evolution. The association of the process genre with these crude attempts to mold national histories out of industrial and ethnographic filmmaking is bound to the flexibility of the metaphysics of labor proposed in the previous chapter.

Using examples from Chile and Brazil, situated in New Latin American Cinema with revolutionary leftist presumptions, she shows that process syntax can also challenge statist narratives about development and progress. Her examples use processual representation to undermine industry—and state-sponsored representational strategies and "open up a space for a new kind of image to









The process genre is mobilized by both the political left and the right. Skvirsky uses Sergio Bravo's *Mimbre* (1957) to show how the representation of artisanal labor challenged the national mythos about technological progress.

emerge." The films function as "allegories of a parallel national community" (150) featuring, for instance, the "processual representation of a mixed-race folk national subject engaged in artisanal work." (148) She treats several films in this section, but I will take as an example her reading of Sergio Bravo's *Mimbre* (1957) about the artisanal manufacture of animal-shaped wicker baskets. She claims that Bravo's representation of artisanal labor challenged the national mythos about technological progress, situating it as an enduring and dynamic craft production central to the Chilean national character. The leftist message is that artisanal craft shows that "men of action" are inventive and ingeniousness with the capacity to re-make the world:

"The human capacity for technological development gains a political significance in this context, for just as a human being can repurpose nature and make some useful object from mere matter, surely she is also capable of transforming the world, of organizing it according to a different set of principles." (164)

In the fifth chapter, *The Limits of The Genre*, Skvirsky explores the representational effects of the formal characteristics of process syntax mapping out its generic terrain. Taking *Jeanne Dielman* as her paradigmatic example, she contrasts it with *Parque Via* (2008), a recent Mexican film about a domestic servant name Beto, who has been left to care for an abandoned estate. As argued throughout the book, in *Jeanne Dielman*, director Chantal Akerman represents Delphine Seyrig's performance of domestic tasks processually. Her labor is systematic and skillful, even instructive, represented in segmented steps with a beginning, middle, and end. She embodies labor that is productive and affective even if it is monotonous.

Parque Via, in contrast, Skvirsky argues, is full of processes, but it doesn't present them processually, that is, Beto's labor isn't presented as skillful work with a beginning, middle, and end. While Seyrig's character is actually preparing food and making beds, Beto is "playing at mowing, at window cleaning, at sweeping," only suggesting a simulation of these activities performed daily for an empty house but without purpose or effect. (207) Skivrsky argues this strategy creates an "anti-process" film because it rejects processual representation of the work of Beto's routine. Skvirsky situates this discussion within the political context of the evolution of domestic labor in Latin America. She usefully calls our attention to cinematic strategies associated with each approach, such as the long shot and close-up in Parque Via, which resists processual representation over the still medium shots of Jeanne Deilman, which highlights her affective dexterity. It's worth pointing out that throughout the text, Skvirsky calls our attention to how filmmakers create the process genre through their choices of framing, editing, lighting and so on. That is, the process genre is constructed and requires choices that demonstrate its key characteristics as in the example above.

Skvirsky finally presents four process genre spoof films in an entertaining Epilogue that acknowledges and enlivens the process genre through parody, exaggeration, and inversion. These films address the genre as a representation of

industrial dehumanized work, an association with which Skvirsky disagrees. Yet, she sees in these spoof films a politics of anti-work discussed above. Watching these films, it's not hard to sense the ways they violate our learned expectations for the aestheticized representation of the labor process.

Watch Process Genre Spoof Films

- Fake Fruit Factory (1986)
- Dough (2005-2006) (Excerpt)
- The Making of Forty Rectangular Pieces for a Floor Construction (2008)

It's not every day that a film scholar gets to claim they've discovered a new genre. Unlike an oceanographer who might venture into an undersea hot water spring to discover a never-before-seen variety of sponge, film researchers are stuck with the problem of discovering anew what was right in front of us all of the time. To that end, it's worth admiring the intellectual work Skvirsky has performed by defining the process genre across existing categories and geographies and then analyzing its affective attributes, formal characteristics, and political valences. The obvious question that haunts such a bold claim is: Is this really a new genre? The answer to that is in the hands of the academic and film critic community. Skvirsky has thrown down the challenge. However, a genre is activated, at least in part, through a common agreement that it designates something relevant. Let's see if others take up the process genre in their analysis of films. I am enthusiastic though that she makes the her claim. From the perspective of genre theory, this book challenges us to think hard about what we mean by genre and what intellectual work is required to establish it as a meaningful category. Skvirsky offers us a model for doing this.

Skvirsky's thesis is not about genre theory (although I can imagine some people might argue that it should be given the claim). In fact, she uses "genre" as "a flexible term.. to designate a kind." (45) Her book is about defining that "kind," not debating what kind of "kind" it is. Considering that her main point is to delineate the social and historical import of the representation of processual labor, this is a wise choice.

Skvirsky elaborates her genre from the inside out by assembling examples based on form and affect. In doing so, she references Altman's definition of genre as a stable syntactic/semantic system. Her usage of Altman's syntactic/semantic definition leans heavily on syntax for generic coherence. She demonstrates that the semantic fields of process genre are political valent so that it would be hard to compare it with the semantics of the classical Western. Further, Altman's syntactic/semantic definition comes from his article on the subject. Yet, his book Film/Genre expands the definition of genre beyond formal and representational characteristics to include a variety of institutional activities in production, distribution, and exhibition.[3] [open notes page in new window] Using this definition, Skvirsky would be hard-pressed to address how the process genre situates itself as a coherent filmmaking practice. Yet, Altman's definition of genre is only one among many.[4]

Nevertheless, the impact of her claims about the importance of processual syntax would be reduced had she described it as a "modality" or some other alternative. Is the process genre formally similar to the Western or a Noir film or melodrama? Probably not and in important ways. These variations perhaps provide a road map for teasing out additional insights into processual syntax. One can imagine that reading this book in a seminar on Genre Theory would generate a vigorous









Dough (2005-2006) is one of the entertaining spoof films which Skvirsky uses to illuminate how the politics of anti-work intersects with the process genre.

conversation.

Setting aside the question of genre, there is one more concern I want to raise, which is more pertinent to the internal logic of her argument. For Skvirsky, the process genre highlights the artisanal qualities of skillful technique in labor, even when representing industrial production. She sees the haptic qualities of dexterity and effectivity of labor as central to its representational strategies. The process genre concentrates our gaze on the physical movements of the laborer or the laborer/machine as they move through the process of production. I wonder, though, if what is aestheticized by the syntax, that is, what is pleasurable about the genre, is really the physical qualities of skillful technique.

Is it possible that what fascinates us about processual representations is the ingenuity embedded in the labor process? I'm suggesting that one way to read the aesthetics of industrial films is not the implicit presence of labor but the implicit presence of social knowledge. In this sense, social knowledge might come in the form of artisanal craft production handed down through generations from master to apprentice or the accumulated knowledge of engineers and managers of industrial output. What seems to me to be artisanal in the video *How people make crayons* is not the specificity of the hands of the workers, but how those hands functions as part of a system of ingenuity that seems to elevate the social importance of the simple physical movements of the anonymous laborer. The labor may be waged labor or segmented or alienated, however, it's also integrated into an astounding social process the end result of which are marvels.

For example, in process genre films such as *Ocean's Eleven* or *A Man Escaped*, it's the ingenuity of the plan that fascinates more than the inseparable dexterity of its execution. What these films have in common with instructional YouTube videos is not so much that they convey information—in fact, many narrative process genre films convey little information about their fictionalized and even impossible processes, but rather that they implicitly contain an ingenious shared knowledge (potentially accessible to the viewer as a similarly intelligent being). A video of pure technique, for instance, a skillful hand playing the game Operation, might be momentarily interesting. Yet, outside the narrative of a clever plan, technique alone is a relatively shallow aesthetic experience. Could it be that the utopian impulse that both capitalists and statists want to capture in the process genre is connected to democratic and humanist potential for human knowledge to liberate us from work through the "magical" ease of social production—a potential inherent in labor processes and represented by the process genre?

Skvirsky's book places labor as a central topic for the discussion of cinematic representation and genre theory. She answers Harun Farocki's concerns about the absence of work in cinema by cleverly asserting that labor is more present than we had thought—we just didn't know how to see it. Her framework suggests a potential to analyze labor through a variety of formal cinematic and affective qualities, their symbolic value, as well as the history of social labor or class politics. Skvirsky's *The Process Genre* is exceptional scholarship; it's both groundbreaking and intellectually rigorous and its ambitious claims are grounded in recognizable formal and affective phenomena. For those of us troubled by the absence of the labor in cinema and cinema studies, Skvirksy's book challenges us

to see in new ways.

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Notes

- 1. Farocki, Harun. "Workers Leaving the Factory." *Senses of Cinema.* November 15, 2010. [return to page 1]
- 2. See Mazierska, Ewa (ed). *Work in Cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013.
- 3. See Altman, Rick. "A semantic/syntactic approach to film genre." *Cinema Journal* (1984): 6-18; and Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre.* BFI Palgrave McMillan. 1999. [return to page 2]
- 4. John Frow's explication of genre might be more friendly to Skvirsky's presentation. Frow, John. *Genre*. Routledge, 2013.

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A central tension explored in the book is the camera's ability to reveal or conceal the labor and capital that informs photographic capture. Edward Burtynsky's seductive aerial vision, *Chino Mine, Silver City, NM* (2012), has also been charged with aestheticizing ecocide and indulging corporate sponsorship.

Copyright for key images here derive from the Verso collection under review.



Sebastião Salgado's landmark Serra Pelada mine series, Brazil, 1986, employs silver shadings and candid perspectives to reveal oppressive labor conditions. This angle of workers' bulging legs conveys much without resorting to facial expression or detached distance.

Photo capture: depiction, extraction, and the work of the camera

review by **Daniel Freed**

Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction, edited by Kevin Coleman and Daniel James. New York: Verso, 2021. Paperback: \$20.26. E-book: \$9.99.

Verso's recent collection, *Capitalism and the Camera*, explores the fertile intersection between photographic reproduction and capitalism's engine of accumulation and extraction. Indeed, much of the volume takes a step further and proposes that the frame of the camera and the frame of capitalist hegemony are often inextricably bound. The editors argue that this symbiotic linkage is intrinsic, and this framing embeds itself within a "cultural ecosystem of images." Chapters investigate photographic milieus, the political-economic systems under which they operate, and the very conditions and labor that enable the camera's possibility. Authors travel novel and occasionally thorny paths to express the interdependence between critical realms—political economy, aesthetic judgement, social history, and photographic technology.

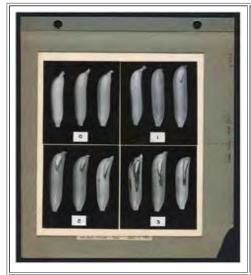
The editors deserve praise for the depth and intellectual provocation of their selections. This collective prism helps to clarify a second argument: that understanding the camera's utilitarian function may simultaneously open up space for a critique of capitalism. What role does photography play in capitalism's saturation of social worlds? Can the camera trace capitalism's affective qualities? Can such a ruthlessly objective technology simultaneously liberate and reveal? The editors also argue for the camera's role in constructing publics. If the collection's wide range of approaches does not always cohere, it nevertheless abounds with sharp and enlightening observations.

Constellations of authors are also suggested for those who work primarily with non-art or art images. This visual schema speaks to the "relative inattention to capitalism by scholars of visual culture, and the relative inattention to photography by theorists of capitalism." Chapters are organized into three clusters to help distill the varied approaches: *Accumulation, Critique*, and *State*.

Editors' Introduction: "Capitalism and the Camera"

The editors' introduction highlights radically opposed dimensions of photography and capital to set the stage for the manifold tensions that follow. They begin with a revealing critique of a multinational corporate photo archive. The United Fruit Company's exploitation of the Honduras Plantation serves as a "case study" for the editors' intersection of capitalism and photography. UFC's vast photo enterprise (10,400 UFC images catalogued in Harvard's archives) reveals an unsavory amassing of corporate self-authorship in their forging of "banana republics." UFC's visual constructions range from scientific dissections of

desirable banana traits to images tailored for shareholders and consumers alike.





The United Fruit Company tailored images for its respective audiences. This measured image chart portrays banana ripening as a scientifically controlled process to maximize shareholder profits.

Here, the United Fruit Company image promotes banana consumption abroad, while concealing the exploitation of labor and resources in Honduras. This canned banana product explicitly features a "workfree" experience.





Allan Sekula's pathbreaking *Fish Story* (1989-'95) explores the plight of global shipping labor from the perspective of workers. Here, the mass and scale of this container ship is photographed from aboard the deck, where work is routinely performed.

The fallout of such massive shipping circuits must be cleaned up by human toil. In *Fish Story*, Sekula poignantly captures this burdensome work, which is often concealed or sanitized by managerial perspectives.



Warren Cariou's "petro-intimate" artworks reconfigure the toxic byproducts of ecological exploitation. Images of petroleum infrastructure

As incisive counter-critique, Allan Sekula's remarkable photo-essay interventions break apart capitalist hegemony by revealing its exploits from the inside out. Sekula's books *Fish Story* (1995) and *The Forgotten Space* (2010) view the global shipping industry in major port cities through the lens of dispossessed workers left in the wake of capital flight. The editors' admiration for Sekula's oeuvre shines through, and I too am left inspired.

Siegfried Kracauer's pessimistic prognosis for photography in 1927 recognized how the camera's factory-like mode of reproduction could easily fall prey to "the hands of the ruling society." Yet Kracauer also glimpsed how photography's literal dissection might allow us to apprehend society as a construction, and thus reassemble it. The editors locate one such site in the "petrographs" of Warren

are rendered with bitumen, and a novel, noxious artform takes shape.



A Taino ceremonial ax dating to the 3rd Century. Now expropriated and housed in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, the ax's reverberant, Puerto Rican context has been categorically constrained to an imperial *objet d'art*.

Cariou. Cariou developed a petro-based artistic practice that exhibits both critical distance and intimacy through his chosen medium, bitumen, which he collects on an exchange basis in the tar sands of Saskatchewan. The resulting creations are emblematically toxic, at once coarsely textured and industrially chatoyent. In contrast to aerial photography's distant panorama of environmental destruction, the editors propose Cariou's petro-interventions as "indigenous and settler colonial visual poetry, intentionally repulsive yet mesmerizingly beautiful." At stake in Cariou's process is the potential for photography's reconfiguration. From under the capitalist sediment, a non-hierarchical creativity emerges.

Cluster One: "Accumulation—Imperial Image Worlds"

"Toward the Abolition of Photography's Imperial Rights" by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: This essay opens with an arresting challenge, grand in scope and conceit. By proposing that photography begins in 1492, Azoulay argues for a fundamental reframing of photography as an imperial technology of domination and conquest. To ground her central project of "unlearning imperialism," Azoulay proceeds to examine how the scene of 1492's violent capture will repeat itself—in images of Algeria from 1830, in images of Palestine from 1948, and in adjacent sites of expropriation and violence. In this light, photography serves as an accomplice to capitalist hegemony. And capitalism becomes inseparable from imperialism's violent ordering of society—its laws and subjugation, its resource extraction, and its regulation of space and bodies. The absence of a recording device does not prevent the spread of imperial visions. A troubling property of photographic capture—a problem with which several of the authors here contend—is the camera's propensity to conceal the very extractions that condition its existence.





This first engraving of Algiers, El-Djezaïr, "Le port d'Alger," fortified town/city plan (c. 1690), displays the town from an external perspective. The depiction bustles with life and dignity via an upright orientation.

This second image, Langlois's panorama for an imperial installation (1832), reverses the perspective and reduces Algiers to a sterile, flattened dissection. Notable is the absence of any human habitation.

To come to terms with Azoulay's massive project, it can be helpful to understand it on two levels. First, Azoulay aims for us to confront the imperialist world-system and durably change it. As arbiters of capitalist conquest, photographic images abide by an imperial logic of exploitation and extraction. Azoulay calls upon us to act as informed abolitionists, as opposed to selective reformers. Azoulay enlists historians, photographers, archivists, and intellectual laborers to actively revoke the imperial project writ large and go "on strike." This solidarity presses us to conceive anew the very world-fabric we inhabit. Thus the second level of Azoulay's project: a fundamental shift in thought is required to extricate ourselves from a pre-fabricated, imperial epistemology. To accede to imperialism's denial, or to reinforce its construction, creates what Azoulay calls

the "'imperial phenomenal field,' through which imperial visions are made into reality." This is not simply acting out the compulsions of a predatory system, but a fulfillment of imperialism's ruthless logic. How can we understand Azoulay's call to unlearn imperialism in visual terms?

The material transformation that photography effects as a documentary tool consigns its imaging to a mode of capture. Even with an intention to disclose capitalist destruction, photography still engages and reifies that destruction. Photography objectifies, accumulates, and proffers its raw material—images—to be further commodified in archives, museums and libraries. Azoulay condemns expert documentarian Burt Glinn's 1956 photo in Palestine for his caption, "Palestinian Prisoners." Moreover, Glinn's preeminence amplified his imperial typecasting with wide and influential circulation. Though Palestinians were forced to flee their homes and brutalized, unquestioning adoption of terms like "prisoners" and "refugees" cedes definition to Israeli imperial categories.





Burt Glinn's documentary photos of persecuted Palestinians reproduced imperial Israeli categories, such as "prisoners" and "refugees." Glinn's photos still circulate these captions in present-day collections.

A selection of Magnum photographer publications suggests the far-reaching visual influence of this platform. Prominent members may easily spread an imperial agenda.



Agricola establishes silver mining as a precondition of art, rather than profiteering, in his treatise *De Re Metallica* (1556). The woodcut medium also takes advantage of the emergent printing press as a visual precursor to photography.

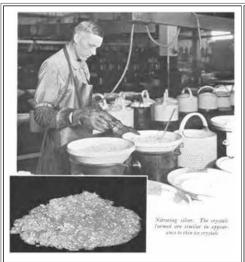
A logical backdrop to imperial decolonization is Azoulay's call to unlearn history itself, and to recognize the discipline of history as deeply implicated in imperialism's construction and maintenance. At times I wondered if Azoulay's encompassing methodology might unwittingly reproduce an unauthorized definition of others' respective labor.[1] [open endnotes in new page] Azoulay's profound call urges us to envision a photography of reparation and worldliness—a mode of being with others in the world, with communities, with those who have been exploited and extracted.

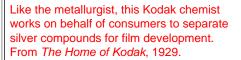
"Mining the History of Photography" by Siobhan Angus: Tracing a route from silver mining in Cobalt, Ontario, to Eastman Kodak's technological and laboratory consolidation in Rochester, New York, Angus proposes the roles of the metallurgist and the mine worker as metaphoric "alloys" of photographic reproduction. Angus does not reject the artistic or historical underpinnings of photography. Rather, she argues that by considering the materiality of the photograph through the lenses of mining and metallurgy, and by following silver's course of extraction and profit, we gain a fuller understanding of photography as industry and labor. Via silver, Angus exhumes three "shadow histories" of photographic labor: the mine, the lab, and the darkroom.

These shadows underscore Eastman Kodak Company's "dematerialization" of labor, as Kodak dominated the marketplace. [2] Profits from repeat sales of silver halide film were maximized at the hidden cost of extractive labor.



"The metal grew tired [...]" displays two 'photomicrographs' superimposed over a collapsing bridge. Kodak's ad promotes photography's superior visioning capacity as a scientific application. The camera sees beyond human fallibility, and "extends its usefulness to all mankind."







Rows of women toil in the development and printing department, Harrow's Kodak Factory, London. This internal image conveys efficiency and control of photographic labor to Kodak shareholders.

Kodak's advertising model reinforced this erasure, with its emphasis on photography's ease and mass appeal. Consumers were also seduced by a transformation of "work to play," rendering the labor of film processing remote and practically invisible. In contrast, it was precisely control of labor that was emphasized for internal corporate promotion. Angus identifies an exemplary material object as counter-critique in a 1907 picture postcard of striking IWW mine workers from Cobalt, Ontario. This postcard serves as a resonant centerpiece, as it foregrounds the very labor that becomes increasingly obscured in the shadows of mine, lab, and darkroom. The handcrafted postcard bears traces of its sender, of its manual handicraft, and of the silver that makes it legible. A tissue of historical, political and artisanal traces, the postcard circulates its silvered imprint of resistance and expands the community's circle.

Art-historical acuity animates this materially innovative thesis. I was struck by the resistance mounted by earlier photo artists to the loss of their tactile darkroom labor.[3] The photo artists' effort to control the conditions of their labor mirrors the resistance of the striking silver miners, upon whose exploits Kodak's business model also depended. The concealment of labor here resonates with other chapters, as does an alternative exchange circuit of resources. Angus notes silver trading networks between the Cobalt mines, Ojibwa and Algonquin nations, and Eastern settlers. Concluding remarks on geology brought to mind John McPhee's geological attention, and how elemental detail accrues to form literary strata[4]. Angus's research complements and enriches the agenda set forth by the editors.





ENLIGHT + AUTHORISM - AUTHORIS

A mixed-media calendar (for "Esdee Paints") with a superimposed devotional icon. The illustrated deity embeds into a naturalistic photo to confer what one Indian artist calls *sajivata*, or "livingness."

A picture postcard from Cobalt, Ontario, 1908, portrays the mining town's financial imperatives: "A view of Cobalt's Wall Street, where frenzied finance plays in mining stocks." Its sender, "Jack," writes upon the card's surface, "This is where I didn't go broke."

This picture postcard of the Silver Miner's Strike, Cobalt, Ontario, 1907, offers a window through which to view the history of photography. The memento bears traces of elemental silver, of the labor that enables the image's legibility, and of the community that circulates its message of resistance.

"Go Away Closer: Photography, Intermediality, Unevenness" by Kajri Jain: This discussion of intermediality and unevenness moves beyond the medium specificity ascribed to photography by modernism's Eurocentric legacy. Jain argues for a vernacular image-world, one embedded in post-colonial social practice and experience. Such a multivalent image-world both responds to, and mediates capitalism's manifest unevenness. As a suitable venue for such a definition, Jain centers upon the bazaar, and the mercantile ethos that pervades it.[5] A foundation of barter informs and extends this image-world beyond capitalism's prescriptive borders. Jain elaborates the upon the bazaar' lateral circulation of images with textured observation.

Jain explores the bazaar's rich visual grammar with an astute analysis of contemporary Indian devotional icons, and the role photography plays in circulating their aura. The social intersections of iconographic media transfer their devotional imprints from the past onto popular consumer goods. Devotional icons are embedded into pillows, maps, calendars, and decorative gifts. Icons carry a signature of divinity that "has the potential to become the abode of that which it depicts." An admixture of paint, photo and print media, these representations confer what one Indian artist calls *sajivata*, or "livingness." That photographic interpolations like embedded icons lie outside modernist indexicality is Jain's point. Likewise, the circulation of icons, and the objects and sites to which they are wedded, cannot be reduced to crude valuation. Gifting and other reciprocal exchange avoid the social taboo of instrumental, Western capitalist transactions. The bazaar's distinctive visual ecosystem intersects with consumer culture at an oblique angle—hence Jain's "unevenness."

The pliability and wondrous re-configuration of these refractive images crystallize in Jain's discussions with contemporary Indian book maker, photographer, and multimedia artist Dayanita Singh. Media and transactional conflations typify Singh's works, which consciously modulate and re-interpret notions of object, installation, archive, and environment. Singh acknowledges the influence of 19th century bazaar artists. Their perseverance under an oppressive regime inspired Singh to democratize her contemporary practice, and encourage direct community participation. Singh's "mobile museum" projects, *Museum Bhavan* (2017) and *Museum of Chance* (2013), lateralize and scramble the museum's hierarchies. Other projects are self-distributed, fashioned and worn, or gifted in enlightening interventions that re-order sense and meaning as communal invitation. [6] Authorship is mediated through interpretative exchange, and

Singh's refreshing oeuvre exemplifies the bazaar's underlying ethos with humility and hospitality.





Photos embed seamlessly into pillows and other consumer goods. The circulation of images, people and objects is informed by the interpersonal connections of the bazaar.

Multimedia and book artist Dayanita Singh's playful interventions reconfigure the bazaar ethos and its contemporary goods, such as her throw pillow with a "Dream Villa" (2007) imprinted upon it.





Singh honors the spaces and connections of her vernacular as she absorbs Western art market conventions. This domestic "museum" display features Singh's unfolded book, *Sent a Letter* (2008), set against conventional titles.

Singh personally sells her photo books from a cart, Venice Biennale, and adopts the role played by art publishers and conglomerates. The roles of artist and audience are reconfigured to emphasize hospitality and communion.

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Jeff Wall's staged *Mimic* (1982, transparency mounted on lightbox) marks a shift to large-scale photo installations. Michaels proposes a relational aesthetic that allows for class awareness through photo-subject identification.

Cluster Two: "Critique—Images without Capitalism"

"Anti-Capitalism and the Camera" by Walter Benn Michaels: Michaels's alternate title, "Anti-Neoliberalism and Art Photography: From the Late 1970s Until, Basically, Now," aptly describes his chapter on anti-capitalism. Michaels argues that some of the same underlying principles inform both art photography's centrality since the late 1970s, and neoliberalism's (largely successful) effort to free itself from working class opposition. In both of these emergences, a subjective positioning takes hold which effectively displaces class conflict in favor of what Michaels characterizes as a discriminatory politics. [7] [open endnotes in new page] Michaels proposes that the neoliberal shift to a politics of discrimination—to the detriment of a politics of exploitation—serves to "guarantee everyone an equal opportunity to succeed *in capitalism*." Michaels analyzes two representative works to elucidate this parallel shift, and how they may reclaim their autonomy. As in other chapters, Michaels highlights the concealment of class antagonism. Yet this political-aesthetic fulcrum remains distinctly intransigent.

To illuminate how art photography came to transmit a relational aesthetic, Michaels begins with a lucid reading of Jeff Wall's Mimic (1982). Mimic, both title and index of the work, presents a staged, socially-charged street photo whose relational positions extend beyond the frame. In its appeal to the beholder, Michaels opposes the photo's lack of intentionality to modern painting's internal autonomy, per Krauss (1982).[8] Transacting the art photo's frame, intersectional politics—of race, of gender—supersede class in their relational influence: photographer, subject(s), setting, contingency. Yet in *Mimic's* staging, Michaels sees an opening for class awareness in its identification between photographer and subject (of discrimination). The orchestration discharges the viewer's condemnation of racism, and class rises to the surface. Michaels's proposition is formally appealing, insofar as it hints that artistic awareness might rescue class from neoliberal-induced amnesia. This endows artists with latent agency. What I find less convincing is how class resistance is mobilized vis-à-vis aesthetic practice. Proposing class as subordinate to race and gender within the image's jurisdiction is not equivocal with the image's (in)capacity to invoke or instantiate class. Nor is the photographer bereft of intention as a consequence of relational contingency.[9]



Robert Frank's photo *Trolley* (1955), from his seminal book, *The Americans*. Frank's



LaToya Ruby Frazier's *Mom Making an Image of Me* (2008) employs a complex



Frazier's small-scale, potent Campaign for

mid-century imagery features a boxed, intimate framing that lends itself well to the book's scale.

orchestration of relations, yet returns to a book-scale format. Frazier's poignant framing captures both intimacy and resistance amidst Braddock, Pennsylvania's capital exploitation.

As a bookend to this era of conceptual art photography, Michaels contextualizes LaToya Ruby Frazier's remarkable *The Notion of Family* (2015), an intensive series of calibrated portraits in deindustrialized Braddock, Pennsylvania. Michaels interrogates the complexity of Frazier's self-/portrait staging in *Mom Making an Image of Me* (2008). Frazier returns us to the intimacy and candid street engagement Michaels recognizes in earlier "book" photographers like Robert Frank, but Frazier's reflexive injection into the post-industrial timeline also moves beyond Frank's relatively prosperous frame.

Michaels likewise moves beyond Teju Cole's self-identification with Frazier's project, to observe that Frazier's mirror-mother- photographer-observer staging excludes as much as it includes.[10] I concur with Michaels, and cannot but think this isolating reflection was envisioned by Frazier. On further thought, I entertained both possibilities simultaneously. That the exclusion Michaels deftly recognizes is precisely what Cole identifies with so strongly. Frazier's poignant presentation excludes the observer in its closed, mother-daughter-mirror calculus. Yet to sense their mutual withdrawal elicits a resonant, painfully aware recognition on the part of the viewer. The act of pulling away mirrors Braddock's historical loss. Mother and daughter hold onto each other, in defiance of capitalism's strip-mining. *You're not wanted*. And though her project is staged, as is Wall's *Mimic*, Frazier's *Family* generates a palpable, aggrieved affect. To bookend with Frazier, as Michaels does, provides an affective depth charge, if not a form of anti-capitalist redemption.

"Capitalism Without Images" by T.J. Clark: Clark reflects upon advertising's ironies and seductions to argue that capitalism's image-world may

Braddock Hospital (2011). Protesters bear witness to the flight of the town's main economic sustenance, as well as its emergency care.



The 2012 card edition of the Credit Sparkasse ('Bank') Chemnitz appropriates the city center's Karl Marx monument. Does the credit card's historical irony signal a failure in our contemporary image world?

be starting to fail. His wry register belies formidable gravity, as in the case of Sparkasse Chemnitz's emblematic 2012 "Karl Marx Edition" credit card. Does the Marx credit card bemoan German re-unification, and long for Chemnitz's former DDR identity?[11] Does it embrace Chemnitz's new position in capitalist lay-away terms with a twist of irony? Consumer irony paves the way for apprehending our contemporary image-world and its shockingly escalating crises. While images proliferate, they "fail to convince or enchant, that is, they fail to direct desire." Clark traces the fissures in our present circulatory system of images, analogous to the earlier decline, or diffusion, of magic in the 17th-18th centuries.[12]_These respective universes don't disappear. Irony may be displaced or impotent, but it still heralds a form of critical and affective engagement. To respond to this visual disenchantment, we must first recognize it.

A key to Clark's reflection on the image-world's declining efficacy is its affective power. As he notes in his explication of a 1940s cigarette billboard advert, it is not the brief, diminutive pleasures of the good itself for sale. Nor is it possible for a ground-level consumer to reach the altitude and grandeur of the billboard's oversized star.





This 1944 Camel cigarette billboard blows puffs of smoke into Manhattan, an earlier example of consumer irony. The psychic divide between the ground audience's yearning, and its elevated star's satisfaction stokes desire.

A German cigarette billboard captured after the fall of the Berlin wall. Consumer irony is foregrounded, as the West subsumes the former DDR in the form of a friendly ghost. Photo © T.J. Clark.

What's left in this disproportional dynamic is an early-20th century recognition of irony: a yearning to participate, a desire to reconcile the gap between capital's visual enticements and its manufactured drives. Irony enacts the "psychic bargain" posed by consumer image seductions. In Clark's examination of the 2011 London riots, affect takes center stage. His observations are at once fascinating and disturbing. What exactly do the rioters gain, if not satisfaction from stolen commodities, political leverage, or their fifteen minutes of fame? The press recycle worn-out tropes and fail to mount an adequate scolding. Clark's prognosis is that these rioters appear to be entirely aware of the triviality of their enterprise. Devoid of significance, they proceed to loot the Foot Locker anyway. The riot's anomie, its pointless destruction is an enactment of spectacle. Performing on this stage of degraded consumption mobilizes feelings. Even if this resembles a theater of the absurd, the players transact for the camera.

Clark acknowledges how the last, tumultuous years render his 2012 analysis quaint, almost anachronistic in a post-script. I think there is often an inherent danger of a rhetorical analysis undercutting its subject. This risk magnifies in light of the capital devastation confronted by other essays here. Yet Clark's deployment of consumer irony as capitalist critique retains potency in its affective charge. What matters is the "power to entrance, to become the image-user's 'form of life.'" To apprehend the transformation of an image-world clearly—even if that world capsizes in the process—expands our critical acumen.



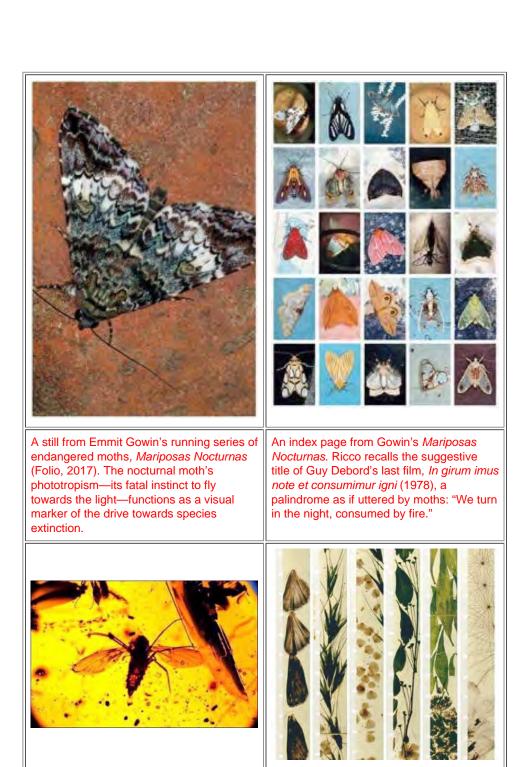
Justin Bieber was quickly photoshopped into this online street capture of the Peckham High Street riot, London, 2011. The very real theft and destruction—a "crisis of consumption"—is assimilated as ironic spectacle.



Boutique mannequins gaze out—and above—the night workers who keep New York City's massive infrastructure running. 5th Avenue, Manhattan. Photo © Daniel M. Freed / Occasional Light.

"Moths to the Flame: Photography and Extinction" by John Paul Ricco: Ricco provides, along with Azoulay, the most far-reaching mode of thought in the collection. As he investigates the relationship between photography and extinction, he elaborates upon a series of provocative inquiries centered upon absence. As if groping in the dark, we gradually acclimate ourselves to a thought-experience beyond human presence, and beyond light itself. Capitalism's perpetual condition of auto-immunity—what Ricco calls the *Capitalocene*—is also "the name for capital as the principal agent of ecological genocide." Can photography exist without light and image, and thus without accumulating natural resources? How does the act of leaving ally itself with absence and extinction? Ricco unpacks these by way of three specimens of extreme biodiversity. By exploring non-human traces, we can begin to imagine a realm that will not be ransacked by human agency and capital appropriation.

Ricco's exploration of lifeforms and extinction is therefore a prelude to rethink photography in a non-appropriative manner. As such lifeforms are "poor in the world"—they lack the values conferred by capital—so too might we reconceptualize photography as poor. How can we conceive of photography in relation to absence and darkness? Sections on the moth, the silkworm, and a bacterium that exists without photosynthesis each signal a distinctive mode of inhabiting darkness. These lifeforms exist in isolation from human disturbance. An explication of photographer Emmet Gowin's intrepid moth series reveals a nocturnal creature fatally attracted to light, a "photographic night." Images from Stan Brakhage's Mothlight (1963) naturally surfaced in my mind as a corollary to the moth's optical compulsions. A passage that traverses global growth in wildfires, and grounds these catastrophes in a recent book on re-wilding by George Monbiot, crystallizes some of the preceding theory on light, ecological devastation, and human agency. [13] As humans cause the majority of forest fires, it logically proceeds that humans have the capacity to alter their response to extremity. We may divest from over-capitalized areas, and thereby change from a stance of resistance and restriction to one of permission and re-habitation.



Thinking in terms of resolutely non-human lifeforms to trace absence *feels* foreign. It is a daunting task to entertain conceptions of extinction in an effort to outrun capitalism's self-perpetuating engine. I find especially intriguing Ricco's reflection on the silkworm, as the silkworm not only retracts from light, but

Strips from Brakhage's Mothlight, which

to re-enact a visual immolation.

was created without a camera. Projected

light shines through translucent specimens

An amber still from Stan Brakhage's

also evokes the moth's inexorable

seminal short film, Mothlight (1963), which

attraction to light. Brakhage was drawn to

the moth's capacity for self-immolation.



Who owns, and controls, the landscape?" Red deer graze as fog filters in. From the *Independent UK* book review of George Monbiot's *Feral* (May 30th, 2013). Getty Images.

actively burrows back into itself to reject humanity *in toto*. Here is a creature whose interior world is predicated on a refusal of light, and that which light animates. Ricco suggestively links Barthes' essay on leaving the movie theater.[14] It is an anticipation of vanishing, of fleeing images, of separation. To capture extinction, photography must bear witness to endings, "to attend to what cannot be captured and made visible." Ricco is astute to privilege absence, despite its intractability. For absence—and its natural correlative, extinction—refuses to be captured by capitalist hegemony and its wages of destruction.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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John Berger located a brief, "liberating moment" for public photography in artists such as Walker Evans. Here, a candid NYC street shot from Evans's "Subway Series" (1938-41).

Cluster Three: "State—Image of the People in Crisis"

"Public Photography" by Blake Stimson: Stimson begins his inquiry into the possibility of an authentic public photography with John Berger's attempt to wrest photography from the state's colonization of private experience. Berger proposed a non-state, "living context" with a focus on a person-to-person dynamic. Stimson pries apart Berger's illusory, liberal contract by acknowledging that fundamentally, private contracts never transact freely under capitalist regulation. What, then, would constitute a genuine public photography that does not recapitulate capitalism's "compulsive drive to privatize" and reduce human experience to transactions?

Stimson identifies photography's reflexive capacity, in addition to its data accumulation and immediacy, as a key to democratize the image's relation within space and history. As a corrective to Berger's interpretive error, Stimson calls upon Clement Greenberg's late lectures to think through the contradictory potentials and promises of public photography. In Greenberg, Stimson finds a key lever for photography's public engagement: aesthetic distance. Stimson observes this when art "distances itself from the instrumental knowability of things." Stimson's recuperation of Greenberg's photographic coming-to-terms is a refreshing discovery.[15] [open endnotes in new page] To flesh out the dilemma between public and private photography initially posed by Greenberg, Stimson places two artists in constructive opposition: Paul Cézanne and Paul Strand. Cézanne developed an observational world where artist-object relations comprise a closed, formal strategy. This private relationship forms the basis for Cézanne's naturalistic aesthetic distance. In contrast, Strand's mature portraits move beyond naturalism's mythologized and privatized contract by placing the artist's deliberations in dialogue with the public sphere.



Paul Cézanne's *Portrait de Madame Cézanne* (1885-90) engages a closed system of artist-subject relations. Cézanne's identification withdraws its



Paul Strand's mature portraits, such as Asenah Wara, Leader of the Women's Party (Wa, Ghana, 1964), also employ an abstract visual grammar. Unlike Cezanne's

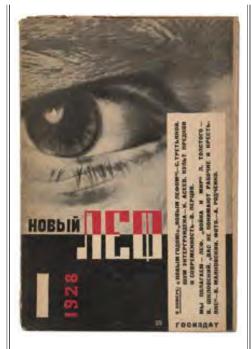
formal abstraction from the world to realize a naturalist aesthetic distance.

private abstraction, Strand's formal gestures open outward, towards a public horizon.

Strand's *Asenah Wara, Leader of the Women's Party* (1964), extends its constellation of facial and formal features towards an "expectant distance," a collective, abstracted engagement. Moving from the artist's formal jurisdiction towards a public horizon is, Stimson reminds us, what Kant envisioned in the *Critique of Judgement*. Stimson finds in Strand's politics of the gaze a crystallization of Kant's proposition, which "produces an actionable political world." The public horizon functions as a collective field, whose aesthetic plurality lie beyond capital's isolation.

Photography holds within its power of abstraction a participatory register earlier hinted at by Greenberg: the promise of a mutual recognition in the world. Can contemporary photo artists successfully manifest this public potential? I am greatly sympathetic with Stimson's touchstones, as well as his effort to think towards an actionable public engagement. I am not sure if, *pace* Greenberg, the private-public tensions are fully resolved with this chapter's apposition of Cezanne and Strand. Can Strand's late work bear the ethical weight of Stimson's attribution? These urgent political-aesthetic propositions merit further case studies.

"Marketing the Socialist Experiment: Soviet Photo-Reportage between the World Wars" by Christopher Stolarski: Stolarski follows a trajectory of Soviet photo-reportage from its "radical project of social and economic transparency" in the 1920s towards its consolidation as a Stalinist administrative and marketing tool in the 1930s. The camera functioned as an interwar eye of Soviet clarity to reveal the everyday workings of society, in opposition to capitalist opacity. Stolarski makes a useful distinction between conscious transparency, which aimed to show the entirety of Soviet infrastructure, and legibility, which transmitted bureaucratic values efficiently. Avant-garde photographers and filmmakers developed their lexicon in large part to promote transparency. Vying factions attempted to convey the Soviet experiment within shifting editorial constraints. Yet a gradual centralization of the heterodox group of photo periodicals and agencies took hold. Through photo-reportage, we are exposed to a shifting nexus of anti-capitalist vision, aesthetic innovation, and, as Stolarski argues, a "set of distinctly un-socialist values."





One of Aleksandr Rodchenko's constructivist layouts for *Novyi LEF* ("New Left Front of the Arts"), 1928. Rodchenko, inspired by film montage, sought to reveal greater Soviet transparency by assembling multiple fragments together in a single vision.

This didactic sequence, "How Not to Photograph for the Competition 'At Work" (Sovetskoe foto, 1927), defines its aesthetic against classical, Tsarist poses. To portray the workforce transparently, editors sought a "lively representation" by featuring candid, active shots.

Photo-magazines like *Ogonek* ("Little Flame"), along with competing photo agencies, comprised a vigorous and accessible publication network that animated Soviet society in the 1920s. Avant-garde visions flourished alongside competing modernist strategies. Aleksandr Rodchenko, inspired by film montage, developed his fragmentary sequences to deliberately disorient viewers. His "constructivist" perspective promised an even greater transparency. This opposed literalized, full-view interpretations of transparency espoused by *Ogonek's* editors. Yet polemics waged against both left and right ultimately "leveraged the language of class war to centralize and streamline information and resources." Rodchenko's constructivist lens was relegated to formalism, and his October group all but disavowed.

Stolarski demonstrates that by the early 1930s, Soviet editors adopted a centrist aesthetic that would function as an eyepiece of Stalinist management. Avantgarde technique, stripped of its disorienting capacity, could be applied as a veneer to bolster state imperatives. Central to statist dissemination was the consolidated mega-agency, *Souizfoto*. Socialism became an image-performance, with new press organs to market Soviet industry both at home and in the West. The most influential, *SSSR na stroike*, counted among its contributors a reformed Rodchenko, editors from *Ogonek* like Shaikhet, and U.S. social documentarian Margaret Bourke-White. These stylized visions were tailored for the aggrandization of the managerial class. Indeed, portraits of managers resembled an international corporate clique.[16]

Unique to Stolarski's entry is that it sheds light on an historical moment—the Soviet system in the 1920s—that makes a concerted, widespread effort to render its labor force clearly. While other chapters show a deliberate concealment of labor, here vying modernist aesthetics all clashed to comprehensively reveal Soviet economy and infrastructure. The tragedy is that, as Stolarski convincingly



By the 1930s, image construction resembled a Stalinist work-performance. Leading publication SSSR Na Stroike adopted a centrist aesthetic to convey the power of the Soviet workforce.

argues, aesthetic advances were fairly quickly appropriated to market socialism as something akin to a corporate brand by the 1930s. Yet by tracing photoreportage's evolution, Stolarski's history permits us to witness pioneering moments and absorb their visual mechanics as reservoirs of engagement and critique. Despite the trajectory's disappointing end, Stolarski's exploration complements this collection's topoi beautifully.





A wide roster of talented artists, including American documentarist Margaret Bourke-White (above), were recruited by SSSR Na Stroike to create a dynamic impression of the workforce at home and abroad.

The domestic magazine audience was almost exclusively bureaucratic. Here, the static portrayal of managers—shot from below to suggest heroism—diverges from their dynamic workforce. "Those notable people, whose names are inseparable from the life of the factory [...]."

"Where There Is No Room for Fiction: Urban Demolition and the Politics of Looking in Postsocialist China" by Tong Lam: Photographer-critic Tong Lam weaves a gripping, first-person narrative of the "politics of attention" in a slum-like development under threat of capitalist demolition. As a practicing photographic artist, I was particularly taken with Lam's undercover docu-installation efforts amidst the friction and decay of Xian Village, a communal holdout in the central business district of Guangzhou. Aware of photographing the pain and suffering of others, Lam is nevertheless urged to "keep going" by a shadowy intruder.[17] Against this microdrama, Lam unfolds a dialectic of capitalist hyper-development and active resistance by long-term villagers. Displaced among these two principal players are a third, wedge group of

migrant workers, whose precarity betrays a lack of agency and capital. Within this tense triangulation, Lam finds himself a critical position—albeit a precarious one—as visiting projectionist, by turns suspected and encouraged for the technological leverage his arsenal affords.





An aerial view of Xian Village, overshadowed here by Guangzhou's imposing business district skyscrapers. Tensions simmer between long-time villagers, migrant workers, and capital development.

Tong Lam's installations project images of Xian Village residents amidst Guangzhou's ongoing demolition. Here, a projected migrant renter illuminates the stark divide between village oppression and capital development (background cranes).





An image of an aspirational, "Bright Future" youth projects onto a construction hoarding (graffiti, left façade). This makeshift structure offers a visual shorthand of vying forces in Xian Village.

A migrant worker cautiously uses his mobile phone in the desolation of night. The framing and atmosphere (small, cramped figure, lower right; low light) highlight the atomization of workers.

Lam's intentions are twofold: first, to bear witness to this dialectic of demolition and resistance, and second, to advance his own aesthetic critique. Among successive, violent stand-offs, Lam observes a developing counter-aesthetic among the resisting coalition. In turn, state police attempt to monopolize the messaging and authorize official state dogma. Lam recognizes a nuanced "politics of looking" among the villagers: "amid their desire to be seen, they also maintained 'the right to not to be looked at' in perilous and compromised circumstances." Of necessity, Lam assumes a mediating role in the surveillance and spectatorship. To negotiate this delicate balance, he calls for an alternative mode of documentary. Lam's critique aims to bypass capitalism's objective bias in favor of a more reverberant expression of class, social and spatial dynamics. Refined technology may sanitize or submerge, rather than cultivate an engaging portrayal of the shifting village slums and their "absurdly" accelerated lifespans.

Lam invokes Jia Zhangke's destabilizing documentary and feature work, which limn the border between fact and lie to mine truth. [18] Zhangke's signature blend of truth and fiction lends relevance to Lam's project: "I suggest that in societies where state-sanctioned facts are inseparable from spectacle, critically constructed fictional images may in the end come closer to revealing the truth." Lam's critical aesthetic compels us to look, as I find myself wishing to see the projections of daily Xian Village life projected against the demolished foundations. Apparently,



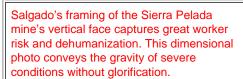
Still from Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006), where the fiction of urban decimation and existential isolation mirrors that of lived experience.

villagers too desired this mediating voyeurism. Lam's imagery serves the villagers' purposes of circulation, resistance and recognition, even as his installation must constantly elude state-sanctioned surveillance. Perhaps the villagers also want to look and see themselves. They might witness their dignity illuminated against nights' shadows, and gain in their capacity to re-imagine their afflicted environment.[19]

Epilogue

"The Mirror and the Mine: Photography in the Abyss of Labor" by Jacob Emery: Emery's fine epilogue folds observations from the foregoing chapters into an enriching discussion revolving around edges and borders. What does a photo's border exclude? Are capital's extractions visible within the frame? How is labor construed vis-à-vis artistic practice? Emery demonstrates how photography is "uniquely equipped to represent the raw edge between a legible scene and the larger world from which it has been wrested." The border between artistic intention and concealed human labor is highlighted in expressions ranging from William Wordsworth, who observes the quarry's relationship to his own writing instrument (the graphite pencil), to Sebastião Salgado's poignant rendering of labor and extraction in the Brazilian goldmines (1986).[20] Emery marks a shift of intention in the work Joseph Beuys, with his redefinition of the instrumentality of labor as non-hierarchical artistic activity. For Beuys, everyone is now an artist. Yet Beuys' liberation is subsequently jeopardized by the neoliberal equivocation raised earlier by Walter Benn Michaels. As Emery affirms, the very notion of aesthetic intention is crassly appropriated as "raw material and corresponds to the neoliberal colonization of private life."





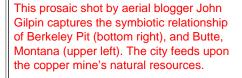


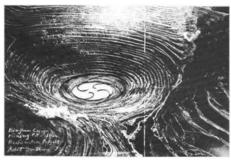
Joseph Beuys's "social sculpture," 7000 Oaks (1982, Kassel, Germany), identifies communal planting as a site-specific action. Beuys's creed, "everybody is an artist," dignifies the participants as land sculptors who reform the earth.

One contemporary realm with the potential to fly above wholesale commodification is aerial photography. Emery weaves an artistic tapestry to sharpen our understanding of aerial visualization. The visual dialectic of abstract form, and the subterranean labor that forges these visions, recall vast "geoglyphs" of civilizations past. Emery lands upon three representative depictions of copper mines, each with distinctive relationships to their respective sites of extraction. Copper, as element and emblem, comprises camera and photographic plate alike. In Edward Burtynsky's monumental photo, *Chino Mine, Silver City, NM* (2012), access trails for miners skirt the frame's edge. Yet as Burtynsky's sculptural panoramas of ecological ruin render their vistas seductive, charges of hypocrisy have been levied at him for aestheticizing ecocide and indulging corporate sponsorship. Aerial blogger John Gilpin's more prosaic capture of the Berkeley Pit betrays what Burtynsky's abstraction occludes. Butte, Montana lies mostly within

Gilpin's frame alongside the pit. The city clearly feeds upon the hollowed-out copper mine that gives rise to its very existence.







Robert Smithson's unrealized design for the Bingham Copper Mining Pit—Utah / Reclamation Project (photostat and plastic overlay, 1973) imagines a recycled landscape. This visionary, layered document leaves a posthumous trace of its artist, as it pencils trails on top of the extracted mine.

Pioneering land artist Robert Smithson's plan for his *Bingham Copper Mining Pit* —*Utah / Reclamation Project* (1973) is revelatory in several senses, not least because his intermedial earthwork was left unrealized. Smithson died in a plane crash as he surveyed another site in 1973. Smithson penciled tailings, or toxic runoff, over the abyssal copper mine in swirling eddies. His grafting of byproduct as artistic inscription reconciles several divides: of capital waste and aesthetic intention; of past and future; of material object and mechanical reproduction; and of the frame's division itself, as its layers multiply and edges unfurl. A parallel arises between Smithson's plan for Bingham Pit, and Warren Cariou's petrographs from the introduction. Both artists seek to recuperate—or "remediate", as corporate lingo has branded their palatable version—the earth's extractions, now as artistic material. These respective exchanges return buried sediment to the surface as reflexive critique, along with a heightened awareness of the labor that accompanies them.

Chapter resonances

Chapters often resonate with one another. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's trenchant critique of capitalism as an imperial technology, and the violence photography reproduces as an instrument of imperial conquest, finds tragic confirmation in Coleman's and James's analysis of the United Fruit Company's photo archives. Here communal Honduran resources are exploited and sanitized by management, and a visual desire for global banana consumption is constructed. John Paul Ricco's discourse on extinction, extreme biodiversity, and the limits of the visible also resonates with Azoulay's critique, for both are predicated on an effort to think visually beyond capitalism's self-perpetuating extractions. Anti-capitalism itself plays a prominent role in Walter Benn Michael's aesthetic critique of the neoliberal turn, as it does in Christopher Stolarski's historical examination of interwar Soviet photo-reportage. As darkness informs Ricco's exploration of finitude, and as darkness defines the realm of the darkroom, so too does darkness pervade Tong Lam's night photo interventions amidst Guangzhou's hypercapitalist village demolitions.

Visual irony surfaces alongside capitalism's blunt offenses, and leavens the grave planetary conditions. T.J. Clark's analysis of a contemporary image-world that fails to adequately direct desire marks a "crisis of consumption," with images

ranging from Justin Bieber's simulacrum to post-DDR cigarette ghosts. Echoes of these ironic fissures can be found in earlier advertising campaigns. Siobhan Angus's analysis of nineteenth-century Eastman Kodak promotion uncovers the erasure of labor via silver mining, mechanical reproduction, and lab work. A delightful irony informs Indian artist Dayanita Singh's ingenious constructions in Kajri Jain's exploration of the bazaar as networked image-world.

Another recurring theme is the somewhat fractious relationship between photography as form and practice, and capitalist ideology. There has been some resistance to thinking of these two modes together. While such resistance provides a stimulating basis for inquiry, it does not always reconcile these modes comfortably. Can the notions of anti-imperialism and anti-neoliberalism proposed here—by Azoulay and Michaels, respectively—be reconciled? How might Blake Stimson's inquiry into the promise of a public photography, predicated upon aesthetic distance, alter within the post-colony intimacies explored by Jain? The editors strategically allow these tensions to remain.

Conclusion

Entries excel here when image selections coalesce with their descriptive thickness. These offer effective teaching and visualization tools. For example, Angus's handcrafted picture postcard of striking silver miners draws upon multiple traces of silver and circuits of labor. Likewise, Emery's explication of aerial imagery intersects multiple planes, elemental strata, and divisions of labor, such as in Smithson's mixed-media Bingham Pit overlay. An occasional discrepancy between photographic theory and practice does not alter the collection's central convictions. Emery cites John Berger's dictum on time and development in the photo: "in a photograph time is uniform: every part of the image has been subject to a chemical process of uniform duration." [21] Yet my own photo practice is based, in part, on producing images that display multiple temporalities within a single frame. Conversely, a discussion of time dilation reproduces a phenomenon I have often witnessed. Human form, and the labor that conditions the camera's work, tend to be obscured by the long exposure's blurring lapse. Emery recalls Sekula's critique of Daguerre's pioneering street photo. The shutter speed required of Daguerre's primitive camera all but erases the city's expedient workers.



Daguerre produced the first location street photo, *Boulevard du Temple*, in 1838. His primitive camera's long exposure visually "erased" the Boulevard's laborers as they walked to work.



Allan Sekula's stark image of an engine worker's ear protection, from *Fish Story*. While this photo also lacks human form, Sekula's frame bears witness to capital, conquest, and resistance: "I CAN NOT BE FIRED. SLAVES ARE SOLD."

Aerial photography's liberating perspective doubly serves as a metaphor for the enhanced vision this collection extends. These authors open up new and

refreshing interconnections between capitalism and photography. This does, however, raise a concern with the collection's intended audience. With such a variety of approaches on display, I wonder if some potential readers may be dissuaded. Posing *Capitalism and the Camera's* urgent questions to a targeted historical, or critical-aesthetic audience might attract more dedicated readers—even at the risk of narrowing the scope of inquiry, or necessitating companion volumes. This may be indicative of an interdisciplinary sub-field yet to reach full maturity. There's an abundance of method here, and less in the way of integration. A comparative analysis of early Japanese photo consumption, alongside early consumer models of Eastman Kodak and Soviet photography, could provide a splendid bridge topic.[23]

While a photo's valences might at times outstrip critical methodology, these are necessary and welcome interventions. The lucidity and force with which the above arguments are deployed might in turn influence future photographic practice, in the hopes that camera use may gain in awareness and impact. *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction* calls upon readers' capacity to reimagine, or unlearn an ethos of accumulation and capture, in favor of image conceptions that bear responsible witness to our increasingly threatened ecosystem.

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Notes

- 1. Of many possibilities for dialogue here, I thought of historian Margaret Lavinia Anderson's recent work on the Armenian genocide. How might Kieser, Anderson, et al, consider Azoulay's propositions in light of the (re-)writing of Armenian historiography? See *The End of the Ottomans: The Genocide of 1915 and the Politics of Turkish Nationalism*, edited by Hans-Lukas Kieser, Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Seyhan Bayrakter, and Thomas Schmutz. I.B. Tauris, 2019. [return to p. 1]
- 2. Angus locates a precedent for Eastman Kodak's 20th-century erasure of labor in Henry Fox Talbot's 19th-century conception of photogenic drawing: the "picture is what makes ITSELF." For Talbot, auto-drawing displaces human agency. See Edwards, Steve. *The Making of English Photography: Allegories*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, 31.
- 3. Angus invokes Lily Cho's work on materiality and darkroom photography as a site of "fleeting possibility and material agency." Lily Cho, "Darkroom Material," *Postmodern Culture* 28: 2, 2018, np.
- 4. John McPhee's omnibus of five major geological works, *Annals of the Former World*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1999. An interview with McPhee by the Paris Review may be found here:

 $\frac{https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5997/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-3-john-mcphee}{}$

- 5. Jain notes the bazaar derived its name from British colonizers. The British displayed neither the sensitized vocabulary, nor the motivation to articulate the subaltern dynamics that thrived beyond narrow economic imperatives. Jain also notes the bazaar was relegated to a "customary" (e.g., cultural) exchange.
- 6. My own artistic conception benefits from Singh's informed play on printed "limited editions" in her project, *Chairs* (2005). Singh altered the edition from static object—"[an] artificial uniqueness in an otherwise infinitely reproducible medium"—to generative social play, by re-signifying her editions as gifts that distributors then allocate freely. From an ordered set, a whimsical, quasi-Dada sequence emerges.
- 7. Michaels cites Adolph Reed's encapsulation of neoliberalism: "capitalism that has effectively freed itself from working-class opposition." Adolph Reed, Jr., "Adolph Reed, Jr. Responds," *New Labor Forum* 23: 1, 2014, 65. It is also important here to cite Michaels himself, so that his argument is not misconstrued: "In arguing that *Mimic* and *The Notion of Family* challenge the virtues of antiracism, I obviously don't mean that they are instead racist. The fact that antiracism is a neoliberal virtue (and a useful managerial tool) doesn't mean that it isn't virtuous (and useful!); it means that it isn't an anti-capitalist politics." [return to p. 2]
- 8. Rosalind E. Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist

- Myths, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986, 141.
- 9. I concede to photographic reproduction as not being so easily reducible to its frame as that of painterly intention. Or conversely, an acknowledgement of offscreen space as always-already present within a capture's potential readings.
- 10. "I was right there, with her, in Braddock. I was there, and the book was a living thing." Teju Cole, "The Living Artist," *New York Times*, February 10, 2016, nytimes.com.
- 11. Clark's approach here may be read in light of his association with the collective Retort, "a Bay Area group of artists and activists." Clark was "part-author of Retort's Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War (2005)."
- 12. See Keith Thomas's foundational cultural history. Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic.* New York: Scribner, 1971.
- 13. Monbiot, George. Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- 14. Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre," in *The Rustle of Language*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1986, 345–49.
- 15. Yet Greenberg arrived too early. His recognition of photography's latent promise suffered from a critical milieu ill-prepared to articulate its public potential. [return to p. 3]
- 16. I would welcome further elaboration of Soviet photo-reportage's semblance with Western capitalist modalities, suggested by Stolarski's reference to James C. Scott. See, for example, Scott, James C. Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- 17. See, for example, Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- 18. See also Eric Dalle, "Narrating topography: *Still Life* and the cinema of Jia Zhangke," *Jump Cut* 53, summer 2011.
- 19. I wondered how Lam's project differs from other projected "ruin" installations of past decades, such as pop-up projections mounted in post-Wende Berlin. Often a gaping construction pit after the fall of its iconic wall, Berlin was an earlier victim of capitalist appropriation. This is the very same East German dissolution emblematized by the Chemnitz Karl Marx credit card, per T.J Clark's essay. Were those mere German luxury/decay installations compared to the hostile projections of Chinese hyper-development? The inexorable capitalist aesthetic of gleaming Chinese skylines supplanting organic villages provides an imposing difference.
- 20. "Inscription Written with a Slate-Pencil upon a Stone, the Largest of a Heap Lying Near a Deserted Quarry," from Wordsworth, William. *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets*, 1820, bartleby.com.
- 21. John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, New York: Vintage, 1995, 95.
- 22. Allan Sekula, "An Eternal Esthetics of Laborious Gestures," *Grey Room* 55, Spring 2014, 24–25, greyroom.org.
- 23. See Ross, Kerry. *Photography for Everyone: The Cultural Lives of Cameras and Consumers in Early Twentieth-Century Japan.* Stanford: Stanford

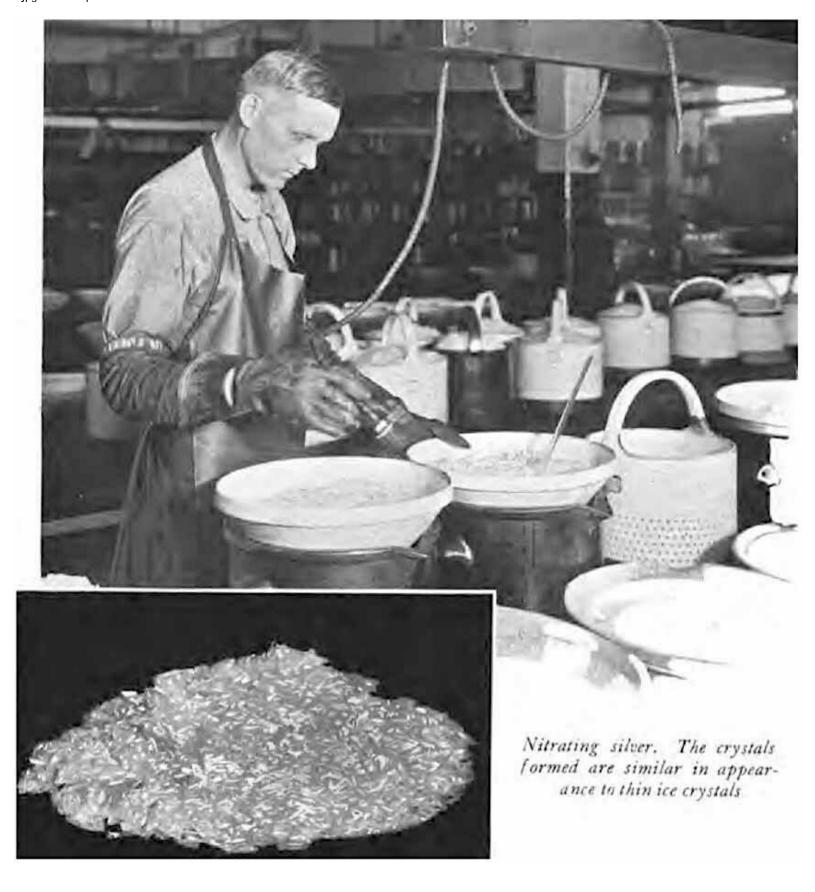
University Press, 2015. See also chapters by Siobhan Angus and Christopher Stolarski, respectively, in the collection under review.

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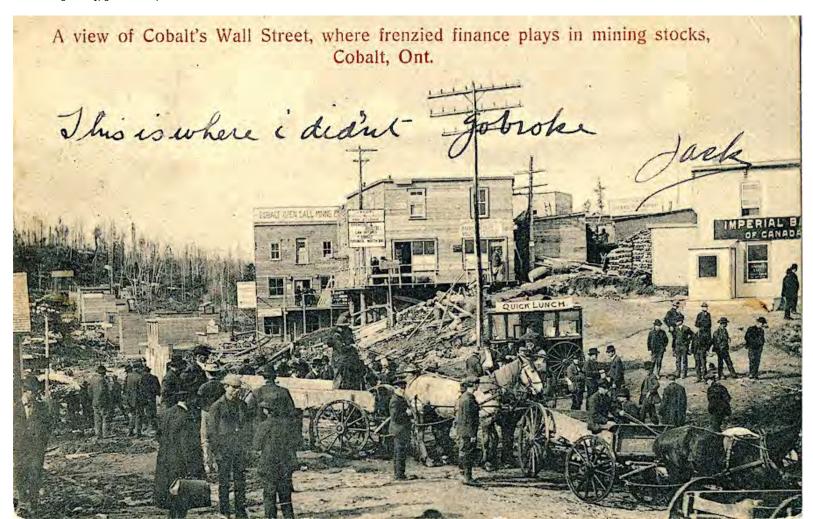


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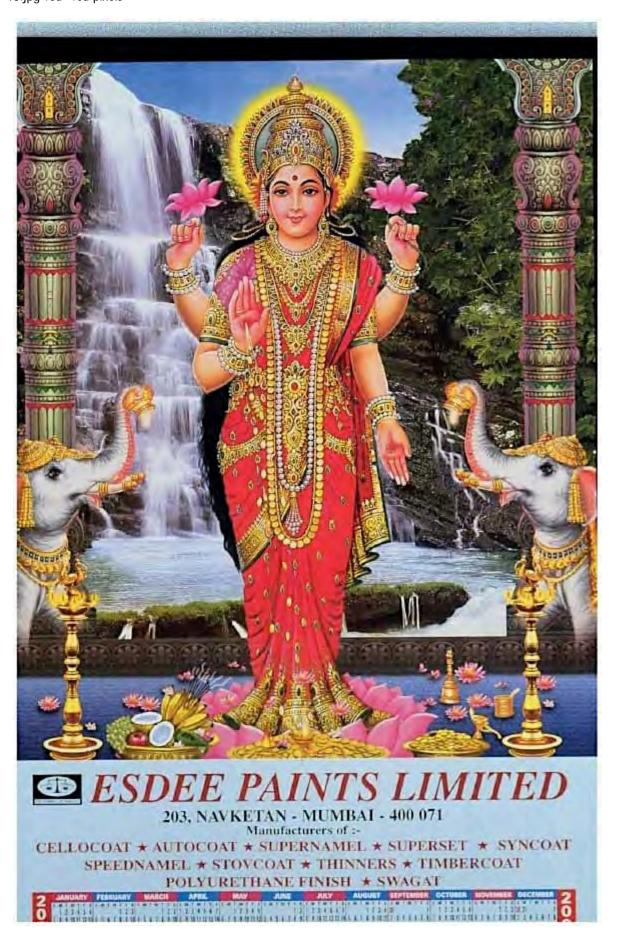




















JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A note on content in poor cinema—critical attractions in Jacob Holdt's American Pictures

by J. Ronald Green



.....to travel with no money into the heart of America

In connection with its recent (Apr 21-Oct 31, 2021) one-person show of the work of African American filmmaker, Arthur Jafa, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, north of Copenhagen, sponsored a conversation between Jafa and Danish photographer and filmmaker Jacob Holdt.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

To open the discussion, Jafa said to Holdt:

"I grew up in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the middle of the Delta. I love William Eggleston's work quite a bit. And it's obviously very great work as political photography. But I always felt like there's a wall of aestheticism between what it is he takes pictures of and the work itself. And that's not a critique, that's just a part of his work. I just had never seen images of the South before I saw your pictures, outside of my family's photo albums—that would be like the only equivalent of it. If I had to put one question to you it would be how did you get these pictures? How did you manage the level of intimacy or access?"

Holdt, director of American Pictures, [2] responded,



... and into Klan territory.



Jacob Holdt and Arthur Jafa at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art near Copenhagen during Jafa's one-person show there in 2020. They have both had major shows there, Holdt in 2009.

"An important answer to your question is to travel with no money." [3]

This essay is a heuristic exploration of a cinema of poverty. Holdt's film composed of still photos, intertitles, and sound—represents his lifelong, in-person testimonial of U.S. poverty and racism. Holdt deploys familiar attractions such as spectacle, sex and violence, and celebrity to dramatize his portrayal of U.S. inequities. I would expect most viewers of American Pictures to relate to, as I did and as Jafa did, the life-risking breadth and depth of this outsider filmmaker's picture of the United States. That picture, produced in the 1970s and 80s, is as relevant today as it was then. In fact, Holdt—in response to the Black Lives Matter movement—is currently updating the book that he produced from the slide show and film—the working title of the updated book is "Roots of Oppression." [4] My own book manuscript, from which this essay is drawn, discusses details of the original film version of American Pictures, including content, methods, critical targets, and issues. It analyzes those details in the light of the film's effectiveness and critical integrity, particularly in relation to its financing. The analysis sometimes compares richer cinemas to Holdt's film, but my focus remains on poor cinema. I have, in draft form, a companion book manuscript focusing on rich cinema. This analysis of poor cinema grew out of my two books on African American filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux, where I argued for a middle-class cinema, an idea supported by analysis of the content and style of all Micheaux's extant films.[5]

The idea of "poor cinema" is related to prior formulations in left film-studies political analyses, such as Julio García Espinosa's essay, "For an Imperfect Cinema," and Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's manifesto, "Toward a Third Cinema," as well as the film movements of Third Cinema and Tricontinentalism discussed in the edited collections *Questions of Third Cinema* and "Rethinking" Third Cinema. More recently, the poor-cinema idea has been briefly summarized and re-theorized by Hito Steyerl in The Wretched of the Screen. [6]

The above exchange between Jafa and Holdt about the origins of Holdt's intimate, authentic pictures of Black American life, was primarily concerned with the *content* of Holdt's pictures. Most of my book manuscript on *American Pictures* also deals with content and its relation to money. But the same poverty that conditions Holdt's content may also affect his aesthetics, which Jafa and Holdt imply. In another article (see endnote 1) I take a close look at how Holdt's "poor" style—analogous to Oscar Micheaux's style in racist 1920s and 30s United States—has a discoverable aesthetic, a style unique to the material conditions of its production.



Holdt's inexpensive camera

My main purpose is to examine how film content may relate to the amount of money spent on the film's production. Holdt has suggested that the uniqueness of his images and sounds derives from the material conditions of the film's production.

American Pictures' material conditions

Jacob Holdt is a Danish high-school dropout who hitchhiked through 48 states of the United States between 1971 and 1976 taking pictures of the conditions of poverty and wealth among the 350 families who hosted him during those vagabond years. He started with about \$40 and was given a cheap Danish point-and-shoot still camera, and later a Canon Dial still camera, with which he took some 15,000 pictures. About 700 of them appear in the book version of *American Pictures* and some 3,000 in the film.

Calling American Pictures a film raises one of numerous problems surrounding this media project, the problem of its medium. I saw it first at Film Forum in New York City, a venue that is in the business of showing real movies. So for me it is without question a movie, and one that works as a movie as well as any in my experience. It is also true, however, that the movie I saw is no longer available, and not because it failed, or was neglected, or was bought by a distributor who mutilated it as were so many of the independent films discussed in Jonathan Rosenbaum's Movie Wars.[7] Rather, it no longer exists because it has been subjected to constant revision by its own maker. That happened because of its success. It is the most protean major work of film I know of, much more so than Kenneth Anger's famous multiple versions of Lucifer Rising, for example. In trying to get a fix on American Pictures, a critic faces not just the maker's constant revision, but also a proliferation of media forms: it is a series of still photos—nowhere is there a moving image on the movie screen—it is a slide show; it is a book of photos and text; it is a 35mm film; it is a traveling photography exhibition. And lacking through all of these versions is a single moving image.

The movie project can morph into these many forms for the same reason that it



Self portrait with simple camera.



The marquee at Film Forum in Manhattan as Holdt documented it, and as I remember it, during the run of his 35mm film.



Holdt at one of his many lectures in the U.S. with the slide-show version of this film.

was so powerful in its original form. There, the purpose of the pictures and spoken words and music that make up the film was not to make a masterpiece or to maximize profit, but to accomplish an important personal and social mission within shifting circumstances. The film is protean, shape-shifting, because it must deal with an audience that, itself like Proteus, tends to squirm, dodge, and shape-shift in order to deal with the painful questions posed by the film's content. The film holds on to its audience, parrying every backlash, defending its own strong points, and assessing any of its own weak points that viewer criticism may expose—and it changes its own shape too in order to keep to its mission. It does this textually, via transparent auto-critique within the work. The film changes form across the several decades of its engagement with audiences, through revision of its versions and its media throughout its history as a time-based work. There is a dogged ethical intelligence behind this film. A maker's committed or obsessive intelligence revealed in projects such as this, and the conditions that encourage or discourage them, are the subject of my project on poor cinema.

Content as attractions

In this essay, I organize instances of Holdt's outsider content under the category of attractions. I've chosen attractions that are common in mainstream films, such as those of Hollywood. Many film critics have discussed cinematic attractions, most notably Sergei Eisenstein and Tom Gunning.[9] In this essay, I define attractions as content meant to shock or surprise in order to draw viewers' attention.

To focus on attractions and entertainment value within a political documentary is not often given serious attention by critics. In film studies, mainstream narrative cinema has been subjected to ideological analysis for decades—no entertainment has been found free of ideology. *American Pictures* does provide an ideological critique of the U.S. and western mainstream in the "attractions" it uses.

For the general intellectual viewer, one attraction is to claim the breadth of issues and the ethical high ground. Progressives may both cheer and critique the film, and conservatives may criticize and denounce it, but both camps may be (and have been) thoroughly engaged in the viewing process. However, the attractions of such a project for an audience seeking entertainment are less obvious; and in considering the many viewers who seek escape through experiences of guilty pleasure and outright transgression of societal norms, the idea that they might find common attractions in a committed film like this might be a factor that critics overlook.

Such familiar attitudes toward viewership exist in the film market; mainstream assumptions may, however, be challenged by some aspects of *American Pictures*. Jacob Holdt has presented this film extensively throughout the world, especially to university audiences, especially in the United States, hoping to confront future generations of leaders—in that he has been successful. But Holdt has a wider audience in mind as well. And in fact he is famous in Denmark and was very successful with his film and book throughout Europe.



Holdt and host with another large audience for one of his slide-show tours.

The film is packed with uniquely tough content. The intelligence, or lack of it, and the protean suppleness of the film's style, are academically interesting, but the film's jaw-dropping array of attractions appeals to interests far beyond the academy. Film scholar Bill Nichols posited that social and personal documentaries are pleasurable because of epistephelia—the desire to know things. [10] It is not necessary, however, to rely on viewer epistephilia to explain the broad appeal of *American Pictures*.

Celebrity and the Gump syndrome

The most astonishing category of attractions that the film relies on is the Forrest Gump, or Zelig, syndrome. Time and again Holdt turns up smack in the middle of —and interacting with—important historical events. Repeatedly he is found hanging out with celebrities and figures of great power and influence. Most documentary makers, especially independent poor ones, do not have this kind of access. Important politicians and celebrities are normally inaccessible except to other figures of power and influence. They are, in the course of their daily life, usually insulated from high-school dropouts, undocumented aliens, and homeless derelicts such as Holdt .

The epic journey of Holdt's vagabondage is dotted with what I call "Forrest Gump moments" that are sometimes hard to believe, but are accompanied by Holdt's incontrovertible photographic evidence, as well as by heaps of detailed testimony that include hundreds of witnesses. Holdt turns up with the American Indians at Wounded Knee. There we see him in improbable situations for an outsider documentarian:

- getting drunk with them;
- shivering in ecstasy (and confusion) with a homosexual leader;
- witnessing gunfire with the FBI who kill some of Holdt's comrades in arms;
- giving an impromptu speech over the coffin of one of the slain Indians;
- avoiding sexual advances from a woman who was, over a pool of blood, grieving for a recently slain husband; and



Holdt showing his book to James Baldwin on a later visit to the U.S. near the end of Baldwin's life.

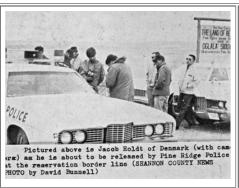


Funeral at Wounded Knee.



Indian compatriots of slain fighter at Wounded Knee.

• escaping the federal forces by blending into one of the funeral processions.





Newspaper clipping of Holdt, in handcuffs, with camera and short-hair wig, at Wounded Knee.

Picture, taken with Holdt's then-damaged camera, of one of the fighters at Wounded Knee.





Armed fighters at Wounded Knee.

Holdt with pistol posing with armed fighter at Wounded Knee.





Traumatized Indian woman grieving beside her slain husband's blood at Wounded

The grieving woman's husband's blood.

Knee. Later, to Holdt's dismay, she sought comfort with Holdt in his sleeping bag.

The level of intimacy represented in these images and narrational reports would be very unusual in filmmaking with higher production values. The same is true of the many examples to follow.

At another time and place, near Charleston, South Carolina, Holdt was living with a 104-year-old woman, her 97-year-old husband and 77-year-old daughter in a "shack that resembled the medieval houses in the Open Air Museum in Copenhagen," and after a hard morning of chopping wood to heat this shack, he managed to make his way to a press conference with Julie Nixon in Charleston with a big hole in his tramp-like pants.



104-year-old woman who sheltered Holdt near Charleston, South Carolina in their "shack that resembled the medieval houses in the Open Air Museum in Copenhagen."

Mother carrying the wood.



Daughter and 104-year-old mother getting wood for their shack, or "medieval" house, where Holdt was staying.



Daughter, 77, and father, 97.

President Nixon's daughter was visiting handicapped children and Holdt ruined her press conference by asking her if she didn't think it was hypocritical to visit these handicapped children after Nixon had just vetoed a bill to aid the handicapped. Julie Nixon was flustered and unable to continue; Holdt discovered later that his question was not included in the evening news broadcast of the



A flustered Julie Nixon fleeing her press conference after being unable to answer Holdt's pointed question about her father's—President Nixon's—social policies toward the handicapped.

event. But, as always, Holdt does present his own photographic evidence of the encounter, thus, incidentally, providing a demonstration of how corporate media manage the news. Holdt's account bears witness to the importance of providing more access to, and promotion of, inexpensive, non-corporate points of view.

Holdt was living precariously with various Black families in Washington, North Carolina, when a friend of one of his friends, Joanne Little, killed a white jailer who raped her; her case became an international cause celebre and Holdt's photographs of Little's living conditions contributed to the legal case that eventually gained her acquittal.



Holdt with Joanne Little during the successful defense process for her killing of an abusive prison guard, Raleigh, North Carolina.



Angela Davis speaking at a rally in defense of Joanne Little, Oakland, California.

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JUMP CUT

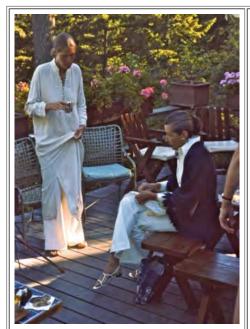
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



After panhandling for a group of homeless men in lower Manhattan, Holdt met and went home with a white woman who turned out to be the world-famous artist, Marisol, who, though recently poorly reviewed for her "fish" art, was, by Holdt and his friends' standards, fabulously wealthy, with a huge Greene Street loft.

In another case, after a desperate Christmas Eve getting drunk on apple wine with a group of New York's Delancey Street bums who were trying to find someone to put them up for the night, Holdt, as the only white person, was doing the begging for the group in a Greenwich Village bar. Finally, he met and went home with a white woman who turned out to be the world-famous artist, Marisol, who, though recently poorly reviewed for her "fish" art, was, by Holdt and his friends' standards, fabulously wealthy, with a huge Greene Street loft, a little palette-shaped swimming pool for a bathtub, and a "football field"-sized studio.

Holdt spent a day with the Pabst brewery family on their "\$3 million farm in California," hoping for money from them to buy more film stock for his project. Mrs. Pabst, when she saw his pictures of poverty and degradation, "repeatedly shouted: 'I hate them, I hate these lazy animals. Why don't they want to work, why don't they take a job?'" These "lazy animals" are Holdt's friends, "people defeated from apathy and alcoholism," people sometimes [pictured] lying in piles of beer cans labeled "Pabst Blue Ribbon." (As here and above, I will be quoting Holdt's narration in the film, slide show, and book throughout this essay. I will footnote other sources.)







Maid serving Mrs. Pabst's granddaughter.

Holdt's pictures, when placed beside his pictures of the afternoon cocktail hour on the Pabst deck, with its elegant clothes, gold jewelry, gold cups, and servants, are embarrassing. It is an embarrassment that film viewers may have felt when passing a homeless person on the street; Holdt's project brings such vastly separate but also intimately connected worlds together more directly than most people are willing to contemplate. When he is showing Mrs. Pabst a picture of a little boy in a muddy ditch, Holdt comments in his film that

"[this little boy's] world is so different from that of Mrs. Pabst's granddaughter whom the maid is serving [in a juxtaposed

photograph], that if it didn't say Pabst on the beer cans [littered around the little boy and his father] we wouldn't know that they belong to the same world and that their lives are in some way connected with each other."

By way of explaining the connection, and in response to Mrs. Pabst's disapproval of Holdt's photos, Holdt says:

"But where does Mrs. Pabst really get all that gold on her ears from and why do these 'animals' not work?"

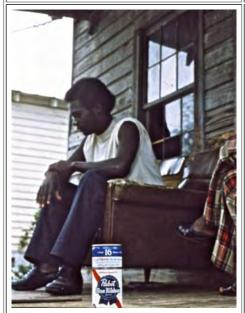
Both Holdt and Mrs. Pabst have an answer to this question, but Holdt's answer is informed by intimate experience that would be hard for Mrs. Pabst to come by.





Poor person cradling child amid a pile of beer cans, detritus of the industry that brought wealth to the Pabst family.

Mrs. Pabst's gold earrings. (In response to Mrs. Pabst's disapproval of Holdt's photos, Holdt says: "But where does Mrs. Pabst really get all that gold on her ears from and why do these 'animals' not work?").







Man in a bar with a can of Pabst

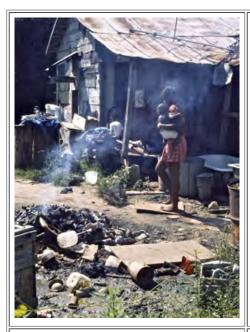
to Holdt's question, but Holdt's answer is informed by intimate experience that would be hard for Mrs. Pabst to come by.

(contemplating a portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr.—and the aftertimes of civil rights?).

On another occasion, in a bar in North Carolina just after a terrifying escape in which he had been almost killed and was forced out of a Wilmington, North Carolina, ghetto by suspicious Blacks, he was approached, taken home, seduced by and, eventually, almost married a woman who was a member of the Schlitz brewery family. While he was living with this woman who "spent money as if it were water," he was going off during the day to interview people in the countryside who were from a tradition so steeped in poverty that they regularly ate dirt."



Showing the dirt to the camera.



House of a family in Meridian, Mississippi, that still eats local clay to supplement their diet.



Evaluating if dirt is ok for eating.



Going to fetch the clay.



Feeding dirt to the baby.



New York Times article on the practice of eating dirt: "It's after a rainfall, when the earth smells so rich and damp and flavorful, that Fannie Glass of Cruger, Miss., says she most misses having some...".

"During the day I photographed hunger, and at night I gorged myself on steaks."

Eventually he learned how racist this Schlitz heiress was, and they drifted apart.

"I was both deeply hurt and very relieved at the same time, said farewell and went back into the ghetto in Wilmington to have another try at getting to live there. I went into the same bar, but this time in the daytime and bought a round of Schlitz for the people there with the money I had left from my days of luxury. And this time I succeeded in being accepted and there was chatter and talk and a warmth without equal. It was at that time that Schlitz started their new ad campaign with the slogan 'Only love is better than Schlitz.' Every time I saw it around the country I thought of Wilmington, and its violent racial hatred."

In West Virginia, Holdt spent an evening drinking with Governor Jay Rockefeller and his wife, Sharon, Senator Percy's daughter, in their kitchen. Holdt's pictures of them show Jay with his drink in front of an open can of Planters Cocktail Peanuts and Sharon and their daughter in their pajamas and dressing gown at a cluttered kitchen table.







Holdt spent an evening drinking with Jay Rockefeller, then President of the University of West Virginia, sometime Governor of West Virginia, and his wife, Sharon, Senator Percy's daughter, in their kitchen in Buckhannon, WV. Holdt found Jay Rockefeller "both liberal and "warm, compassionate, and hospitable."



A young Edward Kennedy

Rockefeller and his daughter, Valerie. Holdt's caption for this picture is "Valerie in one of my more loving pictures of her father." Holdt met Valerie later in life while she was at Stanford, and came to admire the entire family for its socio-political engagement.

Sharon and Valerie in their nighties at table. In these scenes with the Rockefellers, Holdt is dining out on the photographic results of his lack of money.

It is a very sympathetic image. The next day, Jay, whom Holdt liked and admired and found both liberal and "warm, compassionate, and hospitable," nevertheless turned down Holdt's application for grant support because of the line in his application—which Holdt always carried with him and forgot to re-read—about "the Rockefeller clan's brutal slaughter of 41 prisoners at Attica." Holdt, on his website today, insists that this scene be accompanied by his more recent thoughts on the Rockefeller family, which are informed by several meetings he has had with Jay Rockefeller's adult sons and daughter, whom Holdt considers to have been very socially consciously brought up; Holdt now includes an even more sympathetic image to help make up for partially demonizing this family.

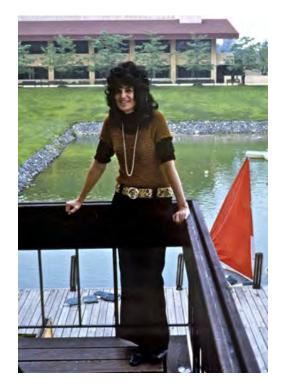
In these scenes with the Rockefellers, Holdt is dining out on the artistic results of his prior lack of money. His media work remains profoundly under-financed here and throughout the following examples of his Gump syndrome and celebrity attractions.

One night in Columbia, Maryland, Holdt went joy riding with friends of the woman he was then living with. The only one who was sober enough to talk to him turned out to be Senator Tunney of California; the others in the car were Ethel Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, and the composer, Burt Bacharach. Holdt reports,

"Burt Bacharach had fallen asleep, so we kept circling around the lake with the Secret Service right behind us in the worst drunk-driving spree I had been on in a long time. Ted had his shirt open and was in a sad state. Ethel looked even more miserable, and I could find no resemblance to news pictures I had seen of her. Since I'm not writing for the *National Enquirer* I leave out some details, but when we finally arrived at Burt Bacharach's house we stayed on to drink with them."

The issue of whether Holdt is "writing for the *National Enquirer*" or not I will take up in a later, separate essay on the critical integrity of Holdt's content, but the reference to tabloid sensationalism at least recognizes the tremendous popular attraction of Holdt's Forrest Gump-like connections with stratospheric celebrities such as the Kennedys and Broadway composers. In this instance, Holdt says that his stories about this connection with the Kennedy family got him into many Black homes when he was hitchhiking later on:

"Everyone wants to get closer to the Kennedys. For the Kennedys are the personification of the American trinity of money, power, and sex. Having 'worked their way up' to enormous wealth, they have in addition reached the pinnacle of political power and—handsome and



Holdt's companion in Columbia, Maryland. She and Holdt found themselves on a wild, drunken ride in a car with Ted and Ethyl Kennedy, Senator Tunney of California, and Broadway composer, Burt Bacharach.



One example of the pictures of the Kennedy family that Holdt often found in the homes of his many Black hosts. Holdt used this image for the cover of his book-version of the film I am discussing.

young—have used it to date women like Marilyn Monroe. They have reached the stars. But they have made one mistake. They have betrayed the American creed of success by—within the very limited American framework—working for the poor and the blacks. You don't get hung on the wall of every black home without having betrayed master-slave society at least to some extent. Thus, it becomes more imperative to vote against a man, not for his drinking, which is fairly accepted, but for the accidental death it caused, than to vote for a brilliant politician whose bills could save thousands of lives. Or even more sickening: to vote *for* a 'sober, God-fearing' President responsible for killing and maiming millions of Vietnamese."

Holdt tells other stories of his encounters with members of the Kennedy family, an attraction that also extends and resonates through the viewing of *American Pictures* because of all the pictures of the Kennedy family that appear on the walls of the houses of the Black poor who host this class-hopping filmmaker.



The slain Kennedy brothers featured in the home of one of Holdt's hosts.



The Kennedy-family portraits are often altar-like.

Perhaps the most astonishing and surely the most affecting Gump moment is the story of Popeye Jackson, a story that Holdt privileges by placing it near the end of



Holdt's portrait of Popeye Jackson in his cell in California. Jackson had been in and out of prison since he was ten years old, but he dedicated himself during his long confinement to self-improvement.



Popeye Jackson working from his prison cell on his famous prison reform campaign.



Graffiti representing the popular movement to free Popeye Jackson, a campaign that Holdt was working closely with in San Francisco when Jackson was killed.

his movie. Popeye Jackson was a prison inmate and ex-convict during the time that Holdt knew him. Jackson became one of the most fearless, effective, and famous prison-reform advocates of his time. He had been in and out of prison since he was ten years old, but he dedicated himself during his long confinement to self-improvement,

"through which he was able to liberate himself from the intensified self-hatred a prison term usually leads to. He . . . began organizing the other inmates into the United Prisoners Union . . . He quickly became a well known figure and was, for instance, chosen as a mediator between the Hearst family and the S.L.A., the terrorist group who kidnapped Patricia Hearst [,] and the media. Popeye's influence on the prison inmates increased and I was told that the police had tried to get him back in prison by planting dope in his car just as on occasion they had threatened him with death. Working in the Union we became closer and closer bound to each other."

Holdt was avowedly not taking photographs during this time; he had decided to stop portraying poverty and wealth and instead to go to work with Jackson and his group to try to change racist conditions more directly. Holdt nonetheless presents plenty of photographs to illustrate his story, in part because Jackson requested pictures from him at certain times to provide evidence for use in his political activism, and partly because Holdt was, himself, not completely inactive with his camera, despite his new commitment to direct action.

Joining Jackson's organization and becoming a full-time organizer was an important decision for Holdt—you might say it is the Forrest Gump fantasy made substantive and extended into real historical action. His political work is structurally related to the end of the original version of the film, because the end of the photography ought to be the place where the film ends; if he stops photographing, presumably he runs out of visual material. When he stops filmmaking and starts organizing—when he "stops preachin' and goes to meddlin'"—a narrative representation *of* reality gets translated into action *in* reality. Holdt's best efforts at media communication yielded to "communicative action" and direct action. [11] [open endnotes in new window]

Gump syndrome as action

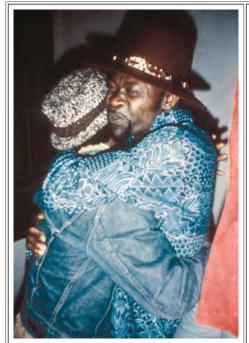
Metaphorically, ending the film with a narrative and thematic "dissolve" into political action suggests to the viewer a similar trajectory for the film's reception; the path of the representational journey suggests an analogous path for the viewer of that cinematic representation. The filmmaker hopes that this series of pictures and stories is impetus to go out of the theater with one's sleeves rolled up. As Holdt's narration says earlier—at a point where Holdt has discovered, in the midst of general despair, a little Black girl who, despite abject poverty, loves her family and reads late into the night by kerosene lamplight—"Now that we've found love, what are we going to *do* with it?"

Holdt, by shifting from image-making to organizing, has seemingly at this point decided what to do with love and with the intimate knowledge of hate, injustice, and suffering—and that is where the story might want to end. And it almost does, and more horribly, more finally, more infuriatingly, and more Gump-like than Holdt was ready for. It was common knowledge in Popeye Jackson's group that FBI informants had infiltrated Jackson's organization, and that police and other establishment representatives regularly terrorized Jackson and threatened to kill him if he did not back off in his political work. But Holdt says,

"For some reason I had difficulty imagining anyone I knew being

secret police. Therefore it totally knocked me out to experience the terror the system utilized against Popeye's union and to realize that one of my friends whom I had most faith in indeed was from the secret police. It was Sara Jane Moore, who was a bit older than the others, and whom we thought was a nice, sympathetic, although slightly confused, housewife from the suburbs. It therefore shocked us when suddenly in the newspapers she openly confessed that she was a spy for the FBI, but now had pangs of conscience because during our work she had been converted to Popeye's views. Two months later she was close to changing world history, when she attempted to shoot President Ford on Union Square. She had such terrible torment over what she had brought about by her FBI work that she wanted to get revenge on the FBI by assassinating the very head of the system, as she said. So what had happened between these two episodes, which could throw her so off balance?"

Here is a Gump-like moment within a Gump-like moment: though many viewers may not remember Popeye Jackson, they probably remember Sara Jane Moore from the national headlines. Here she is, (pictured below) in one of Holdt's scenes, when she was working with Popeye Jackson as an undercover informer for the FBI. Holdt is once again, like Gump, working with future celebrities, right in the middle of the headline action.





Popeye Jackson and friend.

Popeye Jackson with one of his organization's volunteers, an undercover informant working for the FBI, Sara Jane Moore, whom Holdt worked with. Moore later "converted" from government agent to Jackson avenger when she tried to assassinate U.S. President Gerald Ford.

And, to answer the question posed above—what was it that threw Sara Jane Moore into her murderous, anti-government, anti-FBI state of mind?—Holdt's narration introduces his recording of a contemporaneous TV broadcast:

"Popeye was scheduled to come over to select the prison pictures for our paper. He called up, however, and said he didn't have time as he had a meeting with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. We arranged that I should come to the meeting later in the evening and drive home with him. Only two hours beforehand I got a phone call asking me not to go home with Popeye. If I had not received that phone call, I would not have been in a position to watch the news next evening [news report follows]:

- '--Good Evening, this is the Sunday edition of the eleven o'clock Eyewitness News. The San Francisco Police continue their investigation into the execution-style slaying of prison reformer Popeye Jackson, who was head of the United Prisoners Union. Jackson was sitting in a car with Sally Voye, a school teacher from Vallejo, when the shooting took place 2:45 Sunday morning. Police say they died immediately.
- --Now, like many of you I love dogs. I am concerned about them. That's why I feed my dogs Alpo. Because meat is a dog's natural food. That's what they love most. And Alpo's meat dinner has beef products that are really good for them. Not a speck of cereal. Not a better dog food in the world.
- -- (Police): Reports indicate that the killer first fired a shot that smashed a window of the car. The first bullet hit Miss Voye and then Jackson. The gunman was not there to rob the people. Wallets were intact.
 - -- This sounds like an execution-style slaying?
- --You could call it that. We're working on that as a possible theory. We have to rule out robbery.
- --Police say a number of people went to their windows when they heard the shots. Police will begin questioning them tomorrow to find the killer.
- --Here's how it starts. You see someone take that first mouthwatering bite and you've just got to get a taste for yourself. In this world there's only one fried chicken that always tastes so finger lickin' good: And you've got to say HEY! It's a Kentucky Fried Chicken day!"



Holdt's snapshot of the local San Francisco news broadcast reporting the execution-style murders of Popeye Jackson and his companion, Sally Voye. Holdt himself missed being murdered at the same time by a last-minute change of plans.

Holdt implicates mainstream media by not leaving out the trivializing commercials. [12] Holdt includes the commercial in the TV report on Jackson's murder, and shows how the news superficially treats and trivializes this event. I see in that kind of filmmaking an argument for poor cinema. The viewer can directly compare the two treatments of the same historical event, one by Holdt's poor cinema and one by mainstream news. Holdt himself speculates that the assassinations were supported by government authorities, basing his belief on Sara Jane Moore's public interviews about the FBI, and on prior warnings passed on to Popeye's organization about ex-convicts who might have struck early-release deals with the authorities in exchange for assassination services.

Holdt also confronts one of the other—high risk—conditions of poor cinema; he realizes that if he had been with Jackson, he would have been killed for the same reason his friend Sally Voye was killed, merely because she was a witness.





Popeye Jackson and his girlfriend, kindergarten teacher Sally Voye.

San Francisco Examiner story about the Jackson and Voye assassinations.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Holdt meeting his nemesis, Clarence Kelley, who was Director of the FBI. One of Holdt's wildly, oddly serendipitous moments, seemingly meant-to-be, as a waystation in Holdt's ongoing bildungsroman.

After having lost 12 friends to U.S. violence and numerous others to U.S. prisons, with the murders of Voye and Jackson, Holdt had enough and he fled to Europe, where he later began producing the slide show, film, and book versions of his saga in the United States. On one of his numerous return trips to the U.S., he found himself in yet another, related, Gump moment, the final one of the 1984 film and the 1985 English-language version of the book. It's a moment that rounds off the story of the Popeye Jackson murder-conspiracy theory, which was the "final" story of an earlier European version of *American Pictures* in book form. At a dinner at a private club in Alabama, Holdt is shocked to find himself sitting next to the director of the FBI, Clarence Kelley.

"For the next hour I am totally paralyzed with thoughts like 'Did he order the murder of Popeye? He is at any rate responsible.' This same day (it now seems almost predestined) I have bought a tape recorder and with a microphone in my sleeve and a bit more wine I get up the courage to ask. He strongly denies the accusation, but admits that Sara Jane Moore was a paid informer. Gradually my feelings boil over and I shout things like 'You murdered my friend Popeye!' I realize I have revealed too many details when in a somber tone he says, 'Tell me, are you accusing me of murder?'

"Frightened, I beat a retreat, but when he gets up to talk to another FBI man in the corner, I get so scared that I persuade my date to make it look like we're going to the washroom, after which we disappear. My heart is pounding the rest of the night, but not for my date any more. Was it reality or illusion? She reassures me that Kelley really is on a visit to examine charges of police brutality against blacks. I wonder whose side he is on, being dined by the white elite in a private club to which blacks have no access? Again and again I hear his warm, calm, paternal voice, so convincing that at least I believe he can't have ordered the killing. The experience of meeting the human being behind the system, which I saw as a great conspiracy in the bitterness after Popeye's death, is so great that I can't fall asleep that night."

In a picture of Holdt, with his long hair and 18-inch braided beard, standing in shirt sleeves and jeans beside the coat-and-tied Clarence Kelley, neither looks very chummy, but they don't look like enemies either. Holdt's report of his shouting at Kelley is not particularly flattering to Holdt, and he knows it. It is, however, very important to the experiencing of the film. When Holdt shouts, he is giving voice to the deep frustration that had driven him (and, similarly, James Baldwin) out of the United States earlier, a frustration that many viewers will have shared upon witnessing his story about the murders of Jackson and Voye. But it is also an example of Holdt's on-going revision, through self-criticism, of his original understandings of his own American-pictures project. Holdt lies in bed assimilating his encounter with Kelley, the personification of the evil, conspiratorial system he had previously in the film confidently accused of murder:

"A peculiar feeling of something higher up having brought us together brings me to deep calmness and contentedness over the ring having thus closed. Having fulfilled an inner desire to meet the human being behind the most impenetrable of the system's facades is an experience so strong and overwhelming that I must let this warm and amiable

man answer my charges. 'All I can tell you is that it is trumped up, blown out of proportion... You must take into consideration who makes up the FBI...look at me...could you imagine me killing anybody? We are human beings like you and everyone else... We can't think of killing or giving orders for it, that you must understand... But as you know there are a lot of people who sit and make money inventing such stories. Yes, there are even people who make a living writing books about how the FBI assassinates people.'"

Though the truth of Kelly's claims remains unresolved in the film, Holdt backs off in his accusation. In doing so, he recognizes the possibility that the event is more complicated than it seems (as indeed it was, as a Google search will reveal), and he honors the certainty that he does not know enough to be drawing conclusions about culpability in his previous account of the murders, or to be shouting mortally serious accusations at another human being, no matter how privileged and powerful that other person is. It is a self-reflexive and revisionist moment for Holdt—one of many.

The reflexivity has several levels. Since stories of injustice, especially documentary stories, leave the listener, as well as the teller, frustrated, a viewer's response to the Popeye Jackson killing is likely to be sympathetic to Holdt's conspiracy explanation. When we hear of Jackson and Voye's cold-blooded murder, we are likely to find ourselves agreeing that this is the way it probably was, since we may have a psychological need to balance the wrong we have just experienced with an explanation, with blaming, and with hope for justice and healing. Mainstream entertainment movies play on this narrative commonplace all the time and can count on it for perennial cash flow; it is part of the narrative structure of melodrama, and in that sense is one of the main attractions of Holdt's film as well. [13] [open endnotes in new window]

Holdt later revised his work, refusing the cheap satisfaction of easy conspiracy explanations, implying that, despite his terrible pain and hostility toward the perpetrators, and the perpetrating, even evil, "system" of U.S. class privilege and racism, he did not really know what happened or how to fix it. This is a far cry from the call of male melodrama—"Go ahead—make my day." One might look for a long time for an example of mainstream melodrama that textually self-corrects its proven money-maker, the melodramatic denouement.

The last Gump moment I want to point to is one of the first in the film. In the midst of his descriptions of historical slavery and his portrayal of contemporary labor camps in the U.S. South that are set up to entrap workers, through debt or actual slave-like incarceration, into undesirable hard labor in cotton, tobacco, and especially sugar-cane fields, Holdt discovers the 134-year-old former slave who remembers his capture as a 12-year-old in West Africa and tells the story to Holdt's tape recorder.[14] This man, living in dire, obscure poverty that he himself says is a continuation of slavery, is presented as a direct witness to a 400-year-old system that most Americans recall as shameful. Many of those same Americans, however, regard that shameful system as mere history, thankfully relegated to our deep past, a past so far behind us and so corrected by civil-rights legislation that no current African American or political liberal has any right to mention it today as a factor in contemporary lives or as a consideration in U.S. social policy. Holdt belies the past-tense state of slavery by telling the movie audience, via his tape recorder, the story of this "former slave":

- his home in Africa (his mother tells him it's OK to go down to the dock and see what white men look like),
- his capture (the white men invite him and others to come see "the sugar trees" inside the hold of the big ship),



The 134-year-old former slave, Charles Smith, in his house.



Holdt inserts period illustrations as context for his story about the former slave, and for his observations about the lasting effects of the slave trade.



Charles Smith smoking, as he tells Holdt the tales of his capture, Middle Passage, and enslavement in the American South; Smith's voice-over narration in the film was recorded by Holdt on his cheap tape recorder.

the middle passage (the adult Africans want to throw the child overboard to save him from slavery, a mercy child-killing that was common practice in the middle passage),

- slavery (he was put on a block and sold to the highest bidder in New Orleans),
- emancipation (he is said by his neighbors to be "different from other blacks" for reasons that may be related to his having lived through slavery and emancipation), and
- continued virtual slavery (he lives in a small, disintegrating house with cardboard boxes for furniture, in deep, chronic poverty).

Like the celebrities and other inaccessible figures whom Holdt "Gumps" in his film, this former slave is a documentary attraction so rare that it seems unreal; it seems non-documentary, like fantasy, like meeting a character out of the dead past or out of another world, like the characters Saint-Just and Emily Bronte in Godard's film, *Weekend* (1967).

Such a figure as this former slave might appear in mainstream media occasionally as a curiosity, as this kidnapped African did when he finally died (his death was reported in the local papers); but we will seldom find him presented on television, in movies, or in newspapers as Holdt presents him in this film. This scene is another example of Holdt's answer to Arthur Jafa's question, quoted at the beginning of this essay: "How did you manage the level of intimacy or access?," to which Holdt responded that an important answer to Jafa's telling question is "to travel with no money." Holdt—himself a homeless vagabond with a plastic camera—presents this former slave as a person existing on the same plane of life as the filmmaker; the former slave is much like many others in the same narrative who are embedded in a historical situation, engulfed in structural poverty of monstrous character and enormous proportions, an environment in which Holdt, the narrator, had immersed himself for years.[15]

Embedded immersion

"No one can communicate to you
The substance of poverty—
Can tell you either the shape,
or the depth,
or the breadth
Of poverty—
Until you have lived with her intimately."
——Lucy E. Smith, from "Face of Poverty"[16]

John McPhee is one of best U.S. non-fiction writers, owing to his talent, education, the refined working conditions at *The New Yorker* magazine, and a method of documentary investigation that has been called "immersion." When McPhee does a story such as *Coming into the Country* (1976) on late twentieth century pioneers in Alaska, he goes to live in Alaska for months, staying with pioneers for extended periods of time, not just interviewing them but

experiencing their lives through several seasons. He then reports from the point of view of a nearly primary informant.

Much of the best documentary cinema has benefited from similar immersion. Dziga Vertov, one of the contributors to the Soviet golden age of cinema, was not only an enthusiastic Soviet communist, but also spent years traveling around the new empire, living with and showing film footage to the people who made up the subjects of his revolutionary documentaries such as the *Kino-Pravda* series (1920s), *One Sixth of the World* (1926), *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and *Enthusiasm* (1931). In fact, his immersive methods later inspired and gave a name to one of the most important documentary film movements, cinéma vérité, a French translation of Vertov's "Kino Pravda," or "film truth."

The term "cinéma vérité" is sometimes used interchangeably with "direct cinema," but there is a historical and conceptual difference. Though both movements required on-the-spot, *in medias res* filming of ongoing events with small crews and small equipment, the former involved the acknowledged intervention of the filmmakers into the filmed event, often by the filmmakers' conversing on screen with the subjects being filmed. In contrast, the latter required that the filmmakers remain outside the represented events, like flies on the wall, attempting to affect the events as little as possible. Holdt's mode continues the tradition of cinéma vérité, since he is an active agent within the world of the film. Both cinema-vérité and direct-cinema filmmakers immerse themselves in the situation that they are documenting and shoot and tape it "from within," as it is happening. In order for a cinema-vérité filmmaker such as D. A. Pennebaker to make a documentary about a rock music performer such as Bob Dylan, he must travel with Dylan for weeks; for Frederick Wiseman to make his classic direct-cinema film, *High School* (1968), he had to go to high school for months with his very small film crew.

Immersive documentary filmmaking can occasionally be found in mainstream media. When independent filmmaker, Jon Alpert, decided to take the daring step of traveling with the Sandanista guerrillas during the revolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s, he was following a general method employed by other dedicated independent, unaffiliated social documentarists before and after. His films—which are an important and recognized corner of the canon of documentary history—represent one of the most sophisticated bodies of poor cinema so far. Alpert's access to the Sandinista National Liberation Front during their successful guerrilla war against the regime of Anastasio Somosa in Nicaragua in 1979, was so intimate and close to the action that NBC actually hired Alpert as a stringer to deliver the film images for NBC's evening news reporting. After twelve years as an occasional stringer, Alpert became too hot for corporate media, as this paragraph from Wikipedia indicates:

"In 1991, while employed by NBC, Alpert was the first American journalist to bring back uncensored video footage from the first Persian Gulf War. The footage, much of it focusing on civilian casualties, was cancelled three hours before it was supposed to be aired, and Alpert was simultaneously fired. Later that year, CBS Evening News Executive Producer Tom Bettag planned to air the footage but this airing was also cancelled, and Bettag fired." [18]

Alpert was replicating the embedded method employed by war photographers such as Robert Capa in "Moment of Death" (1936) and filmmakers such as John Huston in *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945).[19] When NBC bought Alpert's footage to show on network television in the 1980s, they referred to Alpert as a free-lance reporter, thus subtly changing a radical-outsider, independent filmmaker into something recognizable, commercial, and apparently subservient to the mainstream media. From Alpert's point of view, this arrangement must have been

worthwhile, since he presumably not only got paid well, but he got very wide distribution for the outsider point of view that he risked his life to represent. The fact of network use thereafter of Alpert's documentary material, and also NBC's occasional use of Alpert as an expert, on-camera interviewee concerning the ongoing events of the Nicaraguan revolution, might suggest that independent, poor cinema is welcome on mainstream television and is part of its diet. Alpert's presence actually, however, points up the fact that material such as his is almost never used; it highlights the general lack of diverse, adversarial point of view in the mainstream media. Alpert made these films because he was working in the interest of the Sandanistas. Normally such a revolutionary, *outsider* point of view would be represented only by network *insiders*, not by sympathizers, and virtually never by actual revolutionary participants. Often, only poor cinema can represent such challenging perspectives.

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Usually Holdt's bedding down was platonic, as when he slept with these five little Black children on a cold night in the South, and virtually froze because the tattered blanket was both too small and had prior claim by the cold children. The next day their grandmother mended an old quilt for Holdt to use.



Holdt with homeless men on Avenue D in New York City. His embeddedness was often characterized by danger, since Holdt was often at risk of bodily harm on the streets.



In the reporting of the second Gulf War in 2003, the U.S. mainstream press came up with the term "embedded" reporting, in which journalists were attached to certain invading U.S. military units. This would appear to be an attempt to approximate the immersion methodology of a McPhee, an Alpert, or of cinéma verité and direct cinema, and it was supposed to suggest that mainstream media was providing a participant's perspective. This reporting, however, has been generally acknowledged to be a rather cynical attempt to adopt the coloration of deep coverage when in fact these reporters were constrained from free investigation by the U.S. government. In addition, they were tightly managed by network media employers in their access to and reporting from each "embedded" situation. In similar circumstances in the past, some reporters— including the New York Times reporter, Alan Riding, covering death squads in Central America during the Reagan presidency—got in trouble for making assessments that got too close to the more adversarial opinions of some of their truly embedded, indigenous informants.

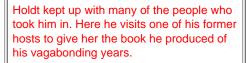
Holdt's reporting is of a different order of embeddedness from any of those more-mainstream examples discussed above. To use a not wholly arbitrary pun, the *embedded* reporters in Gulf War II were *in bed with* the U.S. military, and Jacob Holdt, in *American Pictures*, was in bed with all levels of the class and racially shaped situations in the United States; the difference in those two meanings of "embedded" is inflected by money and power. In Holdt's case, the pun was literalized: he went to bed with a number of dirt poor and filthy rich, Black and white men and women—mostly women—whenever he was invited (except once that I am aware of). Sometimes the bedding down was platonic, as when he slept with a whole family of little Black children on a cold night in the South and virtually froze because the tattered blanket was too small and had prior claim by the cold children.

Sometimes the bedding meant sex; it seemed right to him to say "yes" to everyone. He has left out many of those stories about sex in the more recent versions of his film that are meant for U.S. audiences, because he has drawn so much criticism and automatic rejection, in the U.S., of this aspect of his vagabondage. For better or worse, he was thoroughly embedded in the experiences he portrays and the circumstances he analyzes—and it is his getting involved in the circumstances he reports on that makes him valuable. His embeddedness was also characterized by danger, since Holdt was often at risk of bodily harm on the streets, and he also actually robbed others with his hardened or desperate friends. He experienced gun battles standing beside American Indian activists, as well as later beside ambushed police in Harlem.

Another reason Holdt's film is so different from any other documentary treatment of these issues is that it expresses openly a perspective of love as well as both pain and joy. So many U.S. fiction films are about danger and love, as are many documentaries, both personal and social. Few such films explicitly about love involve the directness and vulnerability that Holdt risks. He seems so immersed in his subject matter that he feels the joy and suffers the pain that he reports in others. He has lived with his informants intimately, as prescribed in Lucy Smith's poem above about poverty. That intimacy between filmmaker and subjects is made possible by traveling with no money, as he pointed out in answer to Arthur Jafa's original ur-question, "[H]ow did you get these pictures? How did you manage the level of intimacy or access?"

Holdt with young men in a bar in Norfolk, Virginia.







Visiting a former host many years after his "traveling with no money." (On the wall is a certain likeness, perhaps not irrelevant to Holdt's welcome in some homes).

Not only was he living in poverty himself, and often trapped in it and in its violent consequences, but his relationship with the characters in his stories is one of lover (with many), family (he married one of the women he met; he was at another time engaged to another women he met), and friend (Popeye Jackson). Holdt's engagement with his content is not based on sympathy or concern in the same way that a concerned filmmaker's normally is. Social documentarists undoubtedly have great sympathy for the people whose pain and injustice they may choose to report and represent, and viewers can potentially feel and partake of that sympathy. But Holdt's feeling is not sympathy any more than one would say a family member feels sympathy for another close family-member's or lover's grave problems; the word "sympathy" is not adequate for that.



Holdt working with a family of pickers in the fields around Bamberg, South Carolina.



The house of the neighbor of one of Holdt's hosts in Matthew, Alabama. The daily violence of poverty.



Killing a snake, one of the many afflictions in the lives of the poor, in Union Springs, Alabama. The daily violence of Holdt's hosts is evident throughout the film.



House in Fayette, Mississippi.



Vermin, weather, smell, and many other conditions of poverty often go undocumented, even in Holdt's work as he was living with it.



This snake, pictured with the insecure shelter meant to protect her from such intrusions, stands for a lot of undocumentable and unimagined misery and anxiety.



Young hooded Black man at a funeral in Queens, New York, looking down into the casket of his slain brother.

Sex and violence

As we have seen, one of the greatest attractions in Holdt's work is the recurring Gump-like moment that presents figures of power, celebrity, abjectness, or historical rarity, candidly as if in real life and often from a perspective not available to the mainstream. But, as astonishing as Holdt's Gump moments may be, the most obvious and cliched attractions available for any film, since the earliest days of the film industry, are sex and violence. These attractions are the "illegitimate" content that mainstream film and television have constantly used to sell their product and to attract advertising for every imaginable commodity in the legitimate marketplace. Sex and violence are abundant in *American Pictures*.

Violence captures our notice first; it saturates the film, becoming a backdrop for every subject and issue. Poverty, the single most prevalent theme of the pictures and words ("race" is a close second) is defined by daily violence. One does not have to know about leftist political theory—such as that in the epic documentary from Argentina that influenced Holdt, *Hour of the Furnaces* (Solanas and Getino, 1968), which features an analysis of the daily violence of unregulated capitalism—to experience the unremitting physical violence of poverty that is documented in the majority of Holdt's hundreds of film images. Holdt's dozens of stories also describe the associated psychological violence of that poverty in unforgettable ways.

A recent slide-show version of the film opens with violent death on both of the two image tracks and on the sound track: in the left picture on the screen is a young hooded Black man looking down in the casket to his slain brother. In the picture on the right, a mother cries over the body of her slain son. Text superimposed over these two images asks,

"Where did all the anger come from? Where did we go wrong?"

Music by Ice T plays on the soundtrack, including these lyrics:

"...so what's in store? I'm talking about race war! 'Get yourself together' 'Open your eyes, get wise' Race war...people getting killed in the streets blood on your feet the ends don't meet, and who're they going to blame it on, me? Try the media, try the PD, try your TV, anybody but yourself. But once the bullets starts flying people starts dying it's all because of lying history books they teach hate I did have no escape from the racist faith it's like South Africa, we'll start killing race war, race war, race war, race war, race war....."

Soon after this opening, Holdt summarizes his own journey through the land of Ice T's anger:



Mother, Catherine, crying over body of slain son, Simon, an unbearable scene, common in Holdt's vagabond world of "no money." Holdt says in the earliest version of the film that "4 times I was attacked by robbers with pistols, 2 times I managed to avoid cuts from men with knives, 2 times frightened police drew guns on me, 1 time I was surrounded by 10-15 blacks in a dark alley and almost killed."

"I hitch-hiked 118,000 miles and stayed in over 400 homes in 48 states. I had arrived with only \$40. Twice a week I sold my blood plasma to earn the money I need for film. Traveling in such a deeply divided society inevitably was a violent experience:

- 4 times I was attacked by robbers with pistols,
- 2 times I managed to avoid cuts from men with knives,
- 2 times frightened police drew guns on me, 1 time I was surrounded by 10-15 blacks in a dark alley and almost killed.
- 1 time I was ambushed by the Ku Klux Klan,
- several times I had bullets flying around me in shootouts,
- 2 times I was arrested by the FBI, and 4 times by the Secret Service.
- I lived with 3 murderers and countless criminals...."





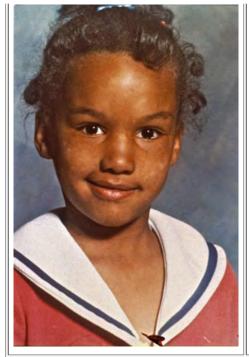


"4 times I was attacked by robbers with pistols" "...in a dark alley and almost killed." "I lived with 3 murderers and countless criminals...."

Near the end of Part II of this recent version of the film (close to four hours of grinding degradation and bloody mayhem after the song by Ice T), the story of Popeye Jackson's and Sally Voye's murders—and Holdt's narrow escape—ends the travelogue of Holdt's first and formative vagabond experience in the United States. The cycle of this personal travelogue is enveloped, by Holdt's narration, in the larger historical saga of slavery:

"Yet another child has been killed in the ghetto—5 years old. The ring is closing. How much more suffering are we still going to witness—or to cause? We don't know. We throw the uncertainty in the ocean with the ashes of our victim. The ocean shall lead her back to the shores her ancestors once came from when we needed them. Once again a black mother must throw her child in the ocean—as she did 400 years ago—the lifetime of our system....."

This ending narration is accompanied by images of crippled, bleeding, and dead bodies of the homeless and poor on the streets of U.S. cities, and of late-twentieth-century Black mothers literally throwing the ashes of their little children into the ocean, which the narration compares to the mothers who threw their children into the ocean from slave ships during "the lifetime of our system," a phenomenon introduced early in Holdt's film by the 134-year-old former slave who had narrowly escaped that fate. [20] [open endnotes in new window]

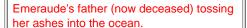




Slain little girl, Emeraude, daughter of one of Holdt's friends in San Francisco.

Family and friends at Emeraude's beach funeral.







Mother tossing ashes. Emeraude's father has died, but her mother, Johari Briggs, still follows Holdt's progress on Facebook, where she has expressed gratitude that "Emeraude will live on in that film."

Between that beginning and ending of Holdt's narrative, violence is almost constant. When visiting the contemporary slave-labor camps near Immokalee, Florida in the 1970s, where the attorney general had already imprisoned some slave camp owners, nevertheless armed guards in the slave camps still shot at intruders, and when NBC reporters arrived, they too were shot at and could not film. One might infer that the only way to get accurate images of the conditions in these camps is through poor-cinema methods. Though the NBC documentary crew could not gain access because of violence, Holdt's film, produced by a vagabond with no money, provides plenty of visual evidence, though he risked his



Between the beginning and ending of the film's narrative, violence is almost constant.



Mugging in a hallway in San Francisco.



Mexican laborer at a Florida slave camp. Holdt says "I saw more blood [at this camp] than in any other place in America, but only a few things dared I photograph—such as this Mexican who was stabbed while I sat next to him."

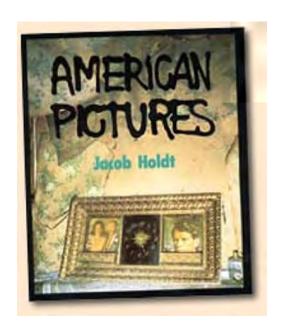
life every time his camera's flash went off.[21] Holdt narrates:

"Even violent rednecks warned me not to go to Immokalee and dared not even drive me there in daylight. Even today I'm amazed that I escaped alive. I made friends with one of the guards, who gave me food and followed me at a distance. Every night I could hear gunshots. I saw more blood than in any other place in America, but only a few things dared I photograph—such as this Mexican who was stabbed while I sat next to him.





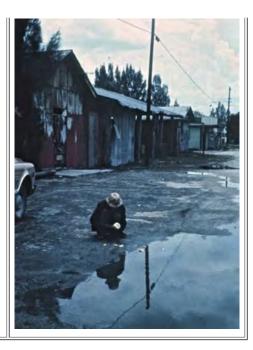
"One is squeezed in between the Pepsi and the Coca Cola machines." Since some slave camps, though not the worst, were run by the Coca Cola company, Holdt's reference to "the Pepsi and Coca Cola machines" is both descriptive and metaphorical; the image of the man collapsed between vending machines is factual evidence, but also symbolic of the man's abject place in the larger system.



The cover of Holdt's first book about his travels. It was a bestseller in Europe and copies, now rare, currently sell for about \$165 online..

What soon interested Holdt more than the dead workers trapped in poverty was those alive: "people in whom everything was extinct."

"These exhausted wretches who earlier survived by working 7 days a week had now slowly succumbed and were just lying around waiting to die, sleeping in streets at night. Often they never woke up."



"What soon interested me most was not the dead ones, but those alive—people in whom everything was extinct. These exhausted wretches who earlier survived by working 7 days a week, had now slowly succumbed and were just lying around waiting to die, sleeping in streets at night. Often they never woke up. One is squeezed in between the Pepsi and the Coca Cola machines."

Accompanying this narration is, in fact, a nighttime, flashbulb image of a man collapsed in the tight space between a Pepsi and a Coke vending machine. Since some of these slave camps were run by the Coca Cola company (though not the worst camps, Holdt reports that they were still terrible), Holdt's reference to "the Pepsi and Coca Cola machines" is metaphorical and the image of the man collapsed between vending machines is symbolic of the man's abject place in the larger system.

The violence throughout Holdt's film is varied. We listen to him as he talks to a woman who regularly eats dirt, a particular sort of red and white clay that generations of poor in the South have called "sweet dirt" and "Mississippi mud." Many of Holdt's friends have untreated health conditions. The house of one of Holdt's lovers was fire-bombed after Holdt briefly left her to visit a Ku Klux Klan gathering, himself in Klan-costume disguise. Holdt's housemate escaped but her brother died. The portraits of JFK, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., that hang on the walls as icons of hope in many of the homes Holdt visits are all portraits of violently slain U.S. political leaders. One of these images appears on the cover of the book version of the film.

With regard to the King assassination, Holdt records the violent words of a Klan meeting he visits in Klan disguise—we hear the following Klan speech on the soundtrack:

"Friends, some years ago the Klan was called to Washington to go before the investigating committee—believe it or not—on the assassination of King. They turned this committee over to two, not blacks, I am going to refer to them as niggers, because they squandered five million of your hard-earned tax dollars to come up with an answer to the assassination of King! Well, first of all: You can't assassinate a nigger! (applause) You assassinate a statesman. You assassinate a man of renowned character and ability. You don't assassinate trash!"



Holdt's narration comments on this speech:

"Such lonesome and despairing losers I cannot help but like. Human beings ready to murder what they call trash have through our negative thinking been oppressed with the basic feeling that they themselves are trash. Their unhealed anger and self-contempt gives them a strange categorical need to hate other people both at the top and the bottom of society."





"Their unhealed anger and self-contempt gives them a strange categorical need to hate other people both at the top and the bottom of society."

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Some of Holdt's stories are more horrific than the Klan speech, such as the night he picked up Woody.



Later, in the 1990s, Holdt met and recorded men whose tape-recorded testimony on the soundtrack was far more violent than those of the Klan meeting. Although I am not doing a detailed comparative analysis of scenes such as these with comparable scenes in mainstream media, I think the frankness of Woody's testimony below would be difficult for mainstream media to access. Holdt's evident poverty and amateur equipment while gathering such testimony was probably a necessary condition for this informant's audio-visual confessions. Holdt narrates:

"One night recently I picked up Woody, this dirtpoor hitchhiker in Mississippi, who told me that he and his two brothers had personally killed so many blacks that they had lost count of them.

[Woody] I don't know if he killed the first two I got blood on me from, I know he busted his head open real bad. . . Took a big whole piece out of his head—and blood got on me then. That's cause I was holding the dude. Every time his heart would beat, blood would squirt out about 5-6 feet, man. The guy ran about ten steps, then just fell—face first. I'll even take you by the old postoffice tonight and show it to you, right where it happened. Then they got a big sign says 'No Niggers Allowed' when you go in there on the highway.

[Holdt] Still? What year is this?

[Woody] This is 91 now, fixing to be 92 and they got a sign saying 'No Niggers Allowed'....He goes out and kills niggers for fun. He tells me he likes to see the fear in their face when they die. It was like when we was riding down River Road I was telling you about how Sammy called one over to the car and John jumped out and shot him. Well, two of them split, and one of them stayed there, you know, he was freaking out. I guess he was young or something, you know. Sammy started beating him in the head with some bottle that he had. And then John started kicking him and stuff—and when they had him on the ground bleeding and where he couldn't move, John just stomped him until he died. The only thing I've never seen John do, was go out and run over the niggers that he used to go out and run over. But I've seen blood on the car and ... like I said, I took T shirts and shirts and stuff like that out from under the car after he ran them over. I've seen him beat up many, many niggers many times and leave them for dead.

[Holdt] How many would you say?

[Woody] How many? More than I can count on my fingers and toes.

[Holdt] Did you usually get rid of them by throwing them in rivers and swamps?

[Woody] Oh, yeah, many times we dumped them in the swamps..."

Holdt immediately contextualizes this portrait of Woody's obscene violence with an explanatory report of prior formative violence toward Woody:

Woody: -"I don't know if he killed the first two I got blood on me from, I know he busted his head open real bad ..."



Holdt: "As always with violent people, I asked [Woody] about his childhood....[Woody's] eyes filled with tears when he told me how the three brothers had constantly been beaten and abused by their deeply alcoholic parents"

"As always with violent people, I asked about his childhood. His eyes filled with tears when he told me how the three brothers had constantly been beaten and abused by their deeply alcoholic parents. His father, who also had killed blacks, had once ripped out the womb of Woody's mother, his brother told me five years later."

Finally, Holdt gives us a tiny angle of relief from these unbearable scenes—and perhaps a justification for his exposing his audience to such graphic violence—by reporting, "My friend Woody is beginning to understand that since he has never had anybody to help him heal his pain, he had turned it outward against Blacks in such a horrifying way."

Later versions of American Pictures—especially a new version of the book, located online at—http://www.american-pictures.com/roots/English/ flipbook/index.html—and large sections of the American Pictures website, include documentation of Holdt's many visits and ongoing relationships with members of the Klan. He approaches Klan members no differently than any of his other documentary subjects—as hosts, and eventually as friends to be engaged with on their own terms. He is sympathetic with their stories, respectful of their basic humanity; he pays them attention, including critical attention, as between friends. He has gained the respect of many in the Klan, even agreeing to the request of one Klan couple for Holdt to perform their wedding ceremony...to "marry" them. And he has convinced several members to leave the Klan, including a former Grand Dragon, who suffered serious consequences as a result, but did not revert. Holdt's poverty—a condition that approximated their own—was a necessary condition of his relationship with Klan members. The surprising nature of the resulting content becomes an example of the attractions that poor cinema enables.



Later versions of American Pictures include documentation of Holdt's continuing visits and ongoing relationships with members of the Klan to this day. Holdt gained the respect of many in the Klan. . .



... even agreeing to the request of one Klan couple for Holdt to perform their wedding ceremony...to "marry" them.



Holdt was, and is, sympathetic with their stories ...



...and respectful of their basic humanity.





Grand Dragon of the KKK at super with his family.

Klan friends.





KKK leader, Jeff Berry, whom Holdt cared about and introduced to a number of his Black friends.

KKK leader visiting some of Holdt's friends.





Jeff Berry, making more Black friends.

One of Jeff Berry's tours to visit Holdt's friends was filmed by a Danish film crew. Sometime during this period, Berry dissolved his KKK group and left the Klan and was soon punished for it by Klan members—Berry was in a coma for two months, blind for a while, and is permanently disabled. Holdt and Berry are still close. When Holdt stayed with my wife Louisa and me in Columbus in 2007, he was headed for Berry's house in Indiana when he left here. Both visits are documented on Holdt's website at http://www.american-pictures.com/roots/ English/flipbook/ku-klux-klan/index.html and http://www.american-pictures.com/ gallery/usa/tour.feb.2007/index.htm.





Holdt re-visiting friends in the Klan. Holdt's poverty during his initial multi-year vagabonding—a condition that approximated their own—was a necessary condition of his relationship with Klan members. The surprising nature of the resulting content becomes an example of the attractions poor cinema enables.

Holdt re-visiting a former Klansman.

As the Klan stories suggests, sometimes Holdt holds out hope for relief from violence and from the greater abjectness of poverty. Part One of *American Pictures* ends on a positive swell of almost religiously loving ecstasy. After having beaten the audience down with the weighty images, sounds, and stories of poverty, injustice, violence, and despair, Holdt introduces us to Linda, an improbably optimistic pre-adolescent girl who lives in a dilapidated shack with no electricity, heating, or water, who reads by kerosene lamplight, when kerosene is available, and who exudes love in spite of everything. As her story is told, a sweet song on the soundtrack asks, "Now that we've found love, what are we going to do with it?"





At the end of Part I of Holdt's film, after having beaten the audience down with the images, sounds, and stories of poverty, injustice, violence, and despair, Holdt introduces Linda, an improbably optimistic pre-adolescent girl.

Linda lives in a dilapidated shack with no electricity, heating, or water.





Linda reads by kerosene lamplight, when kerosene is available. She exudes love in spite of everything.

Holdt re-visits Linda a number of times later in life.

But the violence continues. After intermission, Part II opens with a report on how the people in Part I are doing in the 1990s. It does start with a continuation of the positive relief that ended Part I. Holdt expresses his joy of friendship and extended "family" in the United States, and includes some "good" news. One of the Black women he lived with in a shack has moved into a trailer. The man who, in Part I, ran Holdt off for living with her has since been murdered by her two nephews. But can we call this good news? It is certainly not non-violent. Her sister is now a prison guard, and—Dickensian coincidence—is "guarding those two nephews in the same prison where a mass murderer, John, is." After the killings that Woody described in part one, his brother John got life in prison where he heads an Aryan gang.

Such stories indicate that even the "good news" is also news of hate and further violence, and most of the updates of friends' lives continue the story of despair:

"Many of my friends are now in prison or dead. By 1980, 22 had been murdered! Since then I have lost count."

The worst and best story, given the sense of hope proffered through the images of the little pollyanna, Linda's, unquenchable spirit at the end of Part I, is hers:

"Linda's father froze to death during drunkenness. Linda's anger and self-destruction appeared later than in most black kids. At 17 she became a crack addict and is now most often in prison. She was the only one who did not want to relive her childhood by seeing this show. But after her latest 5 year sentence she began in 1994 to use my book in the prison rehabilitation and now wants to work with me when she gets out."





In one of those early re-visits to Linda, she gets a chance to read the book in which she is such an important beacon of hope. But, at the beginning of Part II of the film, even the "good news" is also news of hate and further violence, and most of the updates of friends' lives continue the story of despair: "Linda's father froze to death during drunkenness. Linda's anger and self-destruction appeared later than in most black kids."

Holdt re-visits the little Pollyanna, Linda, in prison after she "became a crack addict and is now most often in prison. She was the only one who did not want to relive her childhood by seeing this show. But after her latest 5 year sentence she began in 1994 to use my book in the prison rehabilitation and now wants to work with me when she gets out."





Holdt re-visits Linda after her release from prison.

Showing Holdt's book.





Linda in with son.

Linda with family and friend

In Part II, then, the violence not only continues, but leads toward a crescendo of aporia or contradictions. There are breakdowns of virtually all the individual lives and, near the end, of Holdt's own representational process after the murder of Popeye Jackson. In Part I, Holdt had suggested that his project was inadequate to the experience that needed to be communicated:

"Yet the shacks—and the sordid human condition they reveal—are far worse than they appear in my photographs. The pictures do not show how the wind whistles through the cracks making it impossible to keep warm in winter...or the sagging rotten floors with splits so wide that snakes crawl into the living room. The powerlessness I feel trying to photograph these stifling sensations mirrors the powerlessness they impose on the trapped poor. In the same way I feel I can't photograph America's upper class. The rich no longer live in extravagant splendor as in the past, but invest in several mansions or indulge in leisurely travel. Although the photographic gap between rich and poor is small—the psychic leaps I take from shack to plantation home or ghetto to millionaire home each time seems like a trip from earth to the moon."

At another point, he discusses the overpowering oppression of the smells of poverty, as James Agee did in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. These digressions on the inadequacy of the photographic evidence, however, support rather than weaken the overall effect of the portrayal of poverty since they fill in some of the sensations that the pictures and dialogues leave out. Nevertheless, near the end of Part II Holdt's sense of inadequacy of the photographic project develops a different quality. First, the full weight of years of vagabonding, and several hours of unbearable pictures and stories, culminate again in a dysfunction of the representational apparatus:

"James and Barbara and their 4-year old daughter lived on the sixth floor, but nevertheless had double bars on the windows and bars for the door. One day they heard burglars and called police, who arrived and kicked in the door for no reason. James thought it was the criminals and started shooting, but was then himself killed by the cops. Barbara had to be carried to the funeral, incapable of walking. She threw herself over the body of James to wake him up. Her excruciating, pain-filled screams made me break down in tears and I staggered out, paralyzed and heartsick. It was the first and only time in America I was unable to photograph. On the day I became one with the suffering I could no longer depict it."

Beyond sympathy—breakdown, not catharsis

This story suggests that, though violence is being used as an "attraction" as it is in mainstream cinema, the violence does not have the same narrative or emotional result; the denouement is different. Throughout Holdt's film and slide show, we are usually looking at gruesome pictures and often listening to unbearable crying or screams of anguish during such narrated passages. In the case of the story above, however, because of Holdt's breakdown we are looking at images of James and Barbara's empty, post-murder apartment and the trash-filled tenements where the violence had previously occurred. We do not hear the screams and crying described in the narration. This difference is emblematic of the line of narration that immediately follows this scene:

"The scream from people in the closed system is unheard by the world on the outside."





The empty apartment where James was killed by police. Holdt says that "James and Barbara and their 4-year old daughter lived on the sixth floor, but nevertheless had double bars on the windows and bars for the door. One day they heard burglars and called police, who arrived and kicked in the door for no reason. James thought it was the criminals and started shooting, but was then himself killed by the cops."

James and Barbara's trash-filled tenements where the violence had previously occurred. For Holdt at this point in his project, there is a gravitational immensity at the center of his project. The black hole he enters (and unlike the historically poor, he could easily escape) is a closed system, a cycle of violence that begets violence and that won't let out the scream of the trapped. Holdt feels that missing scream, but his intimacy with those buried in poverty sucks him in and he can no longer record the agony of James's wife, Barbara.



In the next scene, Holdt again experiences the closed nature of the system as the police and the poor kill each other in the Harlem ghetto. Here, "[a] white policeman beating a Black woman was shot down in hurt and anger by a man from a roof."

The unheard scream and the unseen violence represent a collapse under the pressure of immersive experience, both in Holdt's impoverished, multi-year journey and in the audience's four-and-a-half-hour exposure to it via Holdt's film. It also represents a black hole at the center of the system in which they—Holdt, his subjects, and his audience—are immersed. There is a vacuum-like, gravitational, absolute immensity at the center of his project. The black hole is "the closed system," a cycle of violence that begets violence and that—because of



Soon after, "5000 cops then marched through the ghetto in a display of power."



The wife of the slain policeman collapses at his funeral. Holdt says that "there is a deeper tragedy underlying these police murders. The dead officer's widow comes as he did from the poorest social group."



Some of Holdt's images of the police suggest hard, damaged lives. "You can't excuse the brutality of the police, but very well understand it —exploited and downtrodden as these poor whites themselves have been.

the event horizon that Holdt's intimacy with poverty only partially defies—won't let out the scream of the trapped. In mainstream cinema, violence is most commonly cathartic—purgative and redemptive—and the values that triumph in the end tend to reflect well on the system in which the movie was produced and experienced. In relation to such mainstream catharsis narratives, Holdt's stories point to a systemic black hole, a socio-political unconscious full of unrepresented realities.

In Holdt's narrative above of the police raid, and in the next scene, the enclosedness of the system is manifest in the fact that the police and the poor are killing each other, seemingly as the quintessential insiders and outsiders of the ghetto. In fact, Holdt—because of his embeddedness in that scene—presents both the poor and the police as different creatures subservient to a larger system, both caught in the same trap:

"A white policeman beating a black woman was shot down in hurt and anger by a man from a roof. 5000 cops then marched through the ghetto in a display of power. But there is a deeper tragedy underlying these police murders. The dead officer's widow comes as he did from the poorest social group. You can't excuse the brutality of the police, but very well understand it—exploited and downtrodden as these poor whites themselves have been. It has become so common to just attack and attack the police, but we forget that they are just as much the victims of the system as they are its representatives."

Holdt's images of the police suggest hard, damaged lives. The system as Holdt describes it emerges into visibility as a sordid arena of lacerated, scarred human pit-bulls loosed among bladed human fighting cocks. The closed nature of the arena induces another crisis of representation for Holdt:

"Shootouts are hard to photograph. When I was caught in the cross fire between police and criminals in Harlem, a cop suddenly used my doorway as a firing position so photographically I came on the side of the police. Here I was caught in a shoot-out between police and criminals in Harlem. A policeman rushed over and used my doorway as a firing position whereby I suddenly found myself photographically on the side of the police. On such occasions I began to understand the brutal but all-too-human reactions of the police. Society trains police to expect the worst instead of nursing the good in people. Therefore they shoot before they question as I saw with this woman [image of dead woman in the street]. Violence breeds counter-violence and in such a climate of mutual distrust, authorities endorse even the most excessive police brutality."

Holdt's story is leading to—not just Shakespeare's cycle-of-violence and Yeats's center-cannot-hold themes—but also an idea of aporia, or irreconcilable contradictions. He represents the effects of the closed system discussed above by reference to a photographic point of view. The police firing position was also Holdt's shooting position, or position of representation; thus, though Holdt "represents" the Black community under fire, he does it from the merged angle of himself and of the police. The Black community under attack, the police under attack, and Holdt's project are all caught in the same trap. The closed system that renders the ghetto a Black hole beyond which screams of pain cannot be heard, then seems to have a similar effect on Holdt's project. Only a dozen lines later,

Holdt says, "It was the first and only time in America I was unable to photograph...." In a way, this inability to photograph abject pain and its perpetrators is admirable, since it indicates empathy for subjects and sensitivity to documentary inadequacy and exploitation. But it also indicates, as in James Baldwin's essays, artistic impotence and personal despair.





The system as Holdt describes it emerges into visibility ...

... as a sordid arena of lacerated, scarred human pit-bulls loosed among be-bladed human fighting cocks.

Holdt further expands the idea of a closed system of violence by showing how individuals of all backgrounds can be absorbed in their own pain to the point of alienation, an alienation defined as lack of access to other points of view. In Holdt's film, such alienation includes the structural insecurity of the rich—the closeting of wealthy children in their own estates owing to the threat of kidnapping and ransom demands, and the enormous expenditures on surveillance and security measures:

"Paralyzed by fear and violence, the entire society begins to resemble a ghetto as we increasingly feel that we are operating in a closed system in which we have lost our imagined freedom."

This expansion of the idea of the closed system to include the bastions of the middle class and the rich will be important in analysis, in a later essay, of the film's critical integrity; it is the perceived airlessness and boredom of the ways of the wealthy and the overly secure that repeatedly drives Holdt back to the byways of the poor. There is a dialectical tension not only between love and alienation that sends Holdt traversing and re-traversing the divided worlds of the United States, but also a tension between violence and dullness. One can wonder whether Holdt may be vagabonding for the same reasons that many viewers are perennially attracted to violent mainstream movies.



The closed nature of the arena of this cock pit induces another crisis of representation for Holdt:

"When I was caught in the cross fire between police and criminals in Harlem . . . [suddenly] I came on the side of the police."





"A policeman rushed over and used my doorway as a firing position."

The police firing position was also Holdt's photographing position, or position of representation, right behind the policeman.



Though Holdt "represents" the Black community under fire, he does it from the merged angle of himself and of the police. The Black community is under attack, but he, the police, and Holdt's representational project are all caught in the same trap.

From this trap Holdt narrates,

"On such occasions I began to understand the brutal but all-too-human reactions of the police. Society trains police to expect the worst instead of nursing the good in people. Therefore they shoot before they question as I saw with this woman [dead in the street]. Violence breeds counterviolence and in such a climate of mutual distrust, authorities endorse even the most excessive police brutality."

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

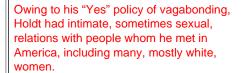
What about sex?

So far, in my discussion of the "sex and violence" attraction, sex has only been hinted at here by references to:

- the women—and sometimes the men—Holdt stayed with,
- the nude photographs of some of those women that some U.S. audiences have objected to, and
- the advances made toward Holdt by an American Indian man and woman on two separate occasions.

In fact, Holdt had sexual relations with a number of other people whom he met in the United States, lived with, and in one case, married.







Some housemates were American Indians, such as this Seminole woman, whom he lived with briefly.

In the 35mm film version of *American Pictures* that I saw in New York in the early 1980s, these stories were told as straight-forwardly as the other stories of his journey, and their naturalness and honesty, as well as their transgression and exoticism, contributed significantly to the overall attraction of the project. However, what I saw as mostly natural and honest, if somewhat emotionally, ethically, and physically dangerous, was taken as egregiously naïve and disingenuous by some U.S. critics and many audience members; for such critics the transgression and exoticism were exploitative. The critique, mounted by some Harvard women, of Holdt's use of the nude photographs of Black women is an example of such responses. In his later versions of *American Pictures*, Holdt responds to these criticisms by lowering the profile of sex as a subject, and by including ethical discussion of the issues of his sexism and exploitation in general, and in relation to race and poverty. In one case, Holdt explains his and his subjects' sexual congress—both the appeal and the danger—as directly related to their world of poverty, alienation, and violence:

"I found it romantic to live in palm leaf huts, but my romance did not last long. After a few days people in town knew where I was and one night someone shouted to order me out of the hut. I had no choice and stepped out into the headlights of a truck from which gunmen yelled,



Holdt married one of the Black women who took him in during his vagabonding.



Holdt's then wife, Leslie.



In the 35mm film version of American Pictures that I saw in New York in the early 1980s, what I saw in the images of nudity and intimacy, such as this one of Mary, was mostly natural and honest, if somewhat emotionally, ethically, and physically dangerous. Those images were taken by some critics and audiences as naïve, disingenuous, and exploitative

'You're out of town before sunrise. If not, you'll never see another sunrise!' I knew that they were deadly serious and the woman dared not have me live with her any longer, so I slipped out of town like a shadow. If you're completely alone in the world, you easily fall in love with people who give you warmth and affection."

Though he presents a plausible psychological explanation for his behavior, Holdt also recognizes, after the fact, his own responsibility in these affairs and a sense of some guilt:

"But just as my infatuations were a product of the violence and strangeness around me, it often seemed as if the act of falling in love itself gave rise to violence. It seems like you can't find deep human relationships without becoming either victim or executioner. Mostly I was a victim as I always let myself fall into the arms of people who had a need for me, but since I always tried to go the whole hog, I occasionally crossed the invisible line separating victim from executioner."

The most dramatic example of crossing the line between victim and executioner is the story of his on-going relationship with Mary:

"Black women usually wanted nothing of a penniless vagabond like me, but in all oppressions there are exceptions. So Mary and I romanticized our relationship and those where some of the happiest days of my life. But her trust in people was not like mine, so I couldn't understand why she had 3 guns under the bed. When I went away to find a Klan meeting in Kentucky, Mary gave me a silver cross to protect me on the journey....But I would soon see how Mary had more use for the silver cross. Because she had had a white man living with her, three whites one night threw a firebomb into her kitchen and the entire house stood in flames.

She managed to get her son out, but her sleeping brother perished in the flames....The tragedy threw me into my recurrent dilemma: Can I as an outsider have fully developed human relationships with people condemned as pariahs? . . .

Often Americans end up blaming me for Mary's tragedy . . ."

Holdt admits he has a dilemma here; he questions himself and his project. There is self-criticism implied in that dilemma, and, in the last phrase above he also reports the common criticism of Americans about his behavior. But in finishing that sentence, he refuses to accept their assignment of guilt, and in fact reverses it: "Often Americans end up blaming *me* for Mary's tragedy, in guilt about the unspoken apartheid line in their hearts and minds which actually caused our Shakespearean tragedy."

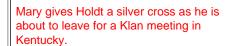




Holdt explains that his relationship with Mary was romanticized as an antidote to their world of poverty, alienation, and violence.

Holdt says: "I found it romantic to live in palm leaf huts . . ." "but my romance did not last long. After a few days people in town knew where I was and one night someone shouted to order me out of the hut. I had no choice and stepped out into the headlights of a truck from which gunmen yelled, 'You're out of town before sunrise. If not, you'll never see another sunrise!' I knew that they were deadly serious and the woman dared not have me live with her any longer, so I slipped out of town like a shadow."







Because she had had a white man living with her, three whites one night threw a firebomb into Mary's kitchen. Holdt questions himself and his project, but he refuses to accept guilt, and in fact reverses it: "Often Americans end up blaming *me* for Mary's tragedy, in guilt about the unspoken apartheid line in their hearts and minds which actually caused our Shakespearean tragedy."

In other relationships too, Holdt's film faces this dilemma, but he does not allow a sense of guilt to close the intimate channels between races and classes that he has opened up in his project:

"The same goes for my privilege as a white: when I stayed with Native Americans I could feel so devastated by guilt among these—our

Holdt has re-visited Mary many times. Lucy E. Smith's poem, "Face of Poverty," is appropriate here:

"No one can communicate to you The substance of poverty—
Can tell you either the shape, or the depth,/or the breadth/
Of poverty—
Until you have lived with her intimately.."

pariahs—that it seemed evidence of an imagined executioner role I had to take responsibility for. Such racist guilt prevents many whites from meaningful relationships with the oppressed."

Again and again, Holdt reaffirms his fundamental philosophy and his answer to the people who criticize this aspect of his story:

"If we wish to maintain a caste system we will always condemn such relationships. Yet, we can only end crippling taboo systems by trying to be completely human toward everyone—thereby risking deeper involvement and love. Without such openness of heart blacks would never have opened up to me....The relationship between Mary and I have [sic] grown deeper over the 22 years, but her life since has been hard."

As Holdt has said, violence and death seem to haunt many of his sexual relationships, even with whites:

"Most of my girlfriends in those years were white—and like Emily, often well off. . . Two of these lovers later committed suicide. Both were millionaires!"

"Yes" policy

One of the reasons Holdt gets into so many of these bizarre and risky situations is his "yes" philosophy, which he also calls "fatalism." [22] As a matter of principle—and as a defining aspect of his level of intimacy with his subjects and their environments—Holdt decided to say "yes" to everyone.

"The greatest freedom I know is to be able to say yes; the freedom to throw yourself into the arms of every single person you meet. Especially as a vagabond you have the freedom, energy, and time to be fully human toward every individual you meet. The most fantastic lottery I can think of is hitch-hiking. There is a prize every time."

The stories about these prizes are astonishing.

- He unwittingly delivers a U-Haul trailer full of contraband from New York to Miami.
- He gets so high on MDA, the "love drug," on one car-ride that he inadvertently, but effectively and embarrassingly, sends the wrong signal to the woman who picks him up next.
- He is "forced" at gun point by an indigent 87-year-old woman to drive her and her belongings, at 30 miles per hour in her old car, 2000 miles from Alabama to Phoenix, where she wants to go to die.

In one of his other rides, he is so hungry that he surreptitiously eats a bagful of hash brownies in the backseat and thus, while sleeping off the powerful "high" on a park bench in a strange city, he discovers the paranoid fear of other "bums" that many Americans feel toward the homeless on U.S. streets.

In his "Yes" philosophy, he accepts the advances of rich white women, poor Black women, and Black, white, and American Indian homosexual men. The Yes philosophy also extends to other realms than sex. He also accepts the opinions and points of view of poor people whom few wealthy or middle-class persons would listen to, of Black and Native American militants, of gays and transsexuals, of prostitutes, and also of rich men and women. Some of these rich people are directly responsible, in Holdt's mind, and all of them are indirectly responsible for the poverty of his other friends—and of poor white racists such as neo-Nazi race



On this return visit, Mary has displayed posters of the Holdt's film, which include images of her.



Mary's house.



Mary later, in another venue.

killers and the Ku Klux Klan. At this writing, in 2022, Holdt is still in touch with and occasionally visiting Klan friends when he comes to the U.S., and he has a well-articulated website devoted to the lives and complaints of Klan members.

Some sections of *American Pictures* present the Yes philosophy as an absolute good:

"One night in New York I heard a voice calling to me from a dark alley down in the sinister area near Ninth Avenue. I was absolutely convinced that if I went into the alley I would be attacked. But I was more afraid that if I didn't do it, it would set a precedent, and then I would be paralyzed, like so many others in America. I forced myself to go in there. Of course it turned out to be only a worn-out five-dollar streetwalker. I gained insight into a kind of suffering I had never encountered before, which proved to me once again that it never hurts to say yes. As a rule, you are directly rewarded for it.... In the beginning I perceived not being able to say no to people as a weakness, since I have always been very yielding. But now I have become convinced that it is a strength, and have therefore made it a habit wherever I go."

In other sections of the story, especially in later versions, Holdt recognizes difficulties with his policy of fatalism:

"Yet I soon learned that there are limits—for instance for a male hitch-hiker. Foreigners usually find white American women incredibly open, but that also makes them extremely vulnerable. It is important to let the woman set the boundaries of a new friendship if we hope to avoid the sexism imposed on us by society. From early childhood we were never given the choice of becoming sexists or racists or not, but only of trying to counteract the most negative repercussions of our suffering. On the other hand I could not . . . just say yes to women and float along to the critical point where hurt feelings could develop. To be a good vagabond is harder than being a tightrope walker."

A major attraction, sex, as well as a pervasive quality of intimacy in Holdt's project, depends on his rejection of the guilt that might be associated with these militantly naive stories of romance, infatuation, saying "yes," and falling into the arms of those who invite him. Though Holdt's ethical, social, and political analysis is not as rigorous and sophisticated as one might wish, nevertheless, it is also true that rigorous and sophisticated analyses that *avoid* physical intimacy with their subject are limited in ways that may be violent in their consequences. Holdt might say that, if one is fighting the misery of poverty and oppression, and fighting the alienation of affluence, and one is not at the same time fighting for one's friends and lovers, one does not really know what or whom one is fighting for, and one is probably not fighting hard enough.

Holdt's project crosses a line. It may be regrettable—in spite of possible culpabilities—that he has had to tone down some of the portrayals of sexual intimacy in the U.S. versions of his show, because the absence of those transgressions has also toned down a sense of human connection that may have the potential to shake up the seemingly inescapable super-gravitational pull of sex and violence in the United States, a malaise frequently referred to, in despair, by James Baldwin in his essays.

Interim summary

American Pictures offers attractions familiar to U.S. viewers. There are numerous examples:



Mary later yet, in middle-class surroundings.



Geegurtha and Jacob on her sofa in 2003, after she, through enormous effort, became "uphabilitated," escaping prostitution and drug addiction.

For more viewing, Holdt has a sequel of the book version of this project. It deals further with his ongoing relationships with Mary and also with his former wife from his vagabond days, Leslie. Holdt's new draft, titled "Roots of Oppression," is posted online at: www.american-pictures.com/roots/.

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- the Forrest Gump fantasy in which Rousseau's-everyman-natureboy-visits-celebrities-heros-and-affects-major-events-of-U.S.-history;
- crushingly brutal, desperate, abject, and adrenaline-rushing violence;
- intimacies; and
- sexual encounters, from ordinary to exotic to bizarre.

Many of these attractions are possibly appealing to audience prurience. Some viewers may see the film as obscene—after all, some have seen James Agee's sublime portrayal of the poor in the U.S. South in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as obscene. If Holdt were to visit me to present a show (which he has done), and suggest going down to the poor neighborhoods of Columbus to see the people oppressed by the U.S. system here and now, instead of in a film (which he has not done), I would not wish to participate.[23] [open endnotes in new window] The feeling of some kind of obscenity or transgression in Holdt's demonstrably highminded moral project is confusing and surely must be part of its attraction.

Obscene of not, *American Pictures* presents some powerful attractions, attractions that are, while common, also effectively different from mainstream U.S. cinema and television. How does Holdt's poor-cinema project compare to rich, commercial projects with similar material and themes? How does it compared to the movie, *Forrest Gump*, or to mainstream television or "embedded" documentary reporting? Are Holdt's Gump-like moments more progressive or more effectively critical than Forrest Gump's "Gump" moments? These questions have not been answered in this essay, but they have been placed on the table. What this essay has shown, hopefully, is that the relation between one quintessentially poor-cinema film and its subjects and subject matter is significantly different from such relations permeating mainstream approaches to the same sorts of subjects—and that the difference is inflected by money. As Holdt said, the answer to Arthur Jafa's query about that difference—"How did you get these pictures? How did you manage the level of intimacy or access?"—is, "to travel with no money."

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

- 1. The first few paragraphs of this essay are almost identical to the opening paragraphs in a related article, "Jacob Holdt's *American* Pictures: A Note on Style in Poor Cinema," which was published in *Senses of Cinema* (No.100, January 2022; available online at https://www.sensesofcinema.com/ 2022/feature-articles/jacob-holdts-american-pictures-a-note-on-style-in-poor-cinema/). At about paragraph five of this essay the focus shifts from style to content. Content was not analyzed in the previous article. N.b., viewers may find some of the content described in this essay, and in the actual film, particularly disturbing. [return to page 1]
- 2. The most recent version of the film *American Pictures* can be found on the Web in two parts: Part One at http://www.american-pictures.com/video/american-pictures/US-1/index.htm and Part Two at http://www.american-pictures.com/video/american-pictures/US-2/index.htm. Holdt's film is a bit of a moving target; it evolves over his lifetime. This analysis of content is based primarily on the online version of the film at Holdt's website in 2010; the version at that site today is also important to this analysis; the film has been revised, but is similar in structure and detail to earlier versions. It is important to keep in mind that, though I approach this "film" as a text, I am no more willing than Holdt to freeze the text in its 1970s version—I see the film as a textual project, always with its relevant revisions. The revisions are treated here not as context, but as protean characteristics of the text. I am not arguing for this approach in general, but I am comfortable with it in the face of this textual project.
- 3. "A Message of Love: Arthur Jafa and Jacob Holdt, in Conversation," in *Arthur Jafa: MAGNUMB* (Humlebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2021), p. 43. The Louisiana Museum in Denmark has also mounted a retrospective of Jacob Holdt's work: *Faith, Hope & Love. Jacob Holdt's America*, Oct 2, 2009-Feb 7, 2010 (Catalog of same title, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2009). Both these catalogs are available on Amazon.
- 4. Holdt's draft of the new revision can be found at www.american-pictures.com/roots/.
- 5. J. Ronald Green, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) and *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 2004).
- 6. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 31-45.
- 7. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2000).
- 8. omitted

- 9. "The attraction (in our diagnosis of the theater) is every aggressive moment in it, i.e., every element of it that brings to light in the spectator those senses or that psychology that influence his experience—every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality . . .," Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage of Attractions," in The Film Sense, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947, p 230-231; orig. publication, Lef magazine, 1923). See also Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Cinema, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde." Wide Angle (No. 8 1986: 3-40).
- 10. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, and *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Nichols's insight may be backed up by distinguished neuroscientist and psychoanalyst Mark Solms's recent book, *The Hidden Spring* (NY: W. W. Norton, 2021), on the origins of consciousness, particularly human consciousness. In making his case, Solms mentions four deeply rooted, evolutionarily ancient, instinctual "motivators," or drives, four families of essential human feeling: Lust, Rage, Fear, and Seeking. The idea of seeking as a drive comparable to lust or fear surprised me, and it helped explain something that I've felt most of my life.
- 11. In sociology, communicative action is cooperative action undertaken by individuals based on mutual deliberation and argumentation. The term was developed by German philosopher-sociologist Jürgen Habermas in his work The *Theory of Communicative Action*. Wikipedia. [return to page 2]
- 12. As I prepare to revise this draft on May 20, 2022, I read in the *The New York Times* of this date (page B5), the headline "Gunman's Video Surfaces, With Ads, on Facebook."
- 13. For discussion of the pervasive "wronged innocence" structure of melodrama, and the "revenge of wronged innocents" structure of male melodrama, see "Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre" in Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill, eds, *Reinventing Film Studies* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 221-243, and Linda Williams "Melodrama Revised" in Nick Browne, ed, *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 42-88. See also, Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976). [return to page 3]
- 14. This section of the film is analyzed for its editing in the companion article of this essay, "Jacob Holdt's *American Pictures*: A Note on Style," mentioned in footnote one of this essay.
- 15. There is updated information and discussion of the evidence for and against the literal truth of this "former slave's" claims on Holdt's website. Holdt later came to believe that the man claiming to be a former slave had internalized his father's early stories of his childhood and the Middle Passage and had come to believe his own former-slave status and the implied great age. The effect of Holdt's ingenuous report in the original version of the film remains startling.
- 16. Smith, in *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song*, ed. Kevin Young (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), p. 356.
- 17. omitted
- 18. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Alpert, accessed 5/5/2022.
- 19. The Capa image and the Huston film can be found online via a Google search.

The following information about Huston's film, relevant to this essay, appears on Wikipedia: "*The Battle of San Pietro* is a documentary film directed by John Huston . . . [it] was released in the U.S. in 1945 but shown to U.S. troops earlier.

"Huston and his crew - which included the British novelist and screenwriter Eric Ambler . . . - were attached to the U.S. Army's 143rd Regiment of the 36th Division. Unlike many other military documentaries, it was claimed Huston's cameramen filmed alongside the infantrymen as they fought their way up the hills to reach San Pietro. . .

"The film is unflinching in its realism. One scene includes close-up views of the faces of dead soldiers as they are being loaded into body bags, a level of realism unheard of in both fictional portrayals as well as newsreel footage of the time.

"The United States Army delayed its release to the public because it showed dead GIs wrapped in mattress covers; some officers tried to prevent soldiers in training from seeing it, for fear of damaging morale. . . General George Marshall came to Huston and took the film's defense, stating that because of the film's gritty realism, it would make a good training film. The depiction of death would inspire soldiers to take their training more seriously.

"Huston quickly became unpopular with the Army, not only for the film but also for his response to the accusation that the film was anti-war. Huston responded that if he ever made a pro-war film, he should be shot. . . The film was screened to U.S. troops in North Africa in 1944, where John Horne Burns described it in a letter as 'almost more than any heart can stand'. . . Huston was no longer considered a pariah; he was decorated and eventually promoted to major.

"In 1991, *The Battle of San Pietro* was selected for the United States <u>National Film Registry</u> by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The Battle of San Pietro, accessed 6/12, 2022)

- 20. Lars von Trier, in the coda of his extraordinary film, *Manderlay* (2005), borrowed, with permission, a montage of these images from Holdt's film. [return to page 4]
- 21. Many other examples of the effectiveness of poor-cinema approaches to highly protected injustices shielded by power, influence, and violence could be mentioned, including Jon Alpert's, discussed above, and recently revived films such as James Blue's *Who Killed the Fourth Ward?* (1979; accessible on YouTube). Another example I have followed is a series on YouTube of surreptitiously filmed iPhone videos by the group Mercy for Animals documenting cruelties in factory-like chicken farming.
- 22. See Ole Bech-Petersen, "The Fatalistic Hobo: Jacob Holdt, Touring, and the Other Americans," *American Studies International*, Feb. 2000, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1.
- 23. Hollis Frampton rejected, in conversation, the idea of documenting poor people; his response was something like, "As soon as the rich begin welcoming the poor into their homes to photograph and film them, then I might become interested in documentaries about the poor." Dana Spiota, in her recent novel, *Wayward* (New York: Knopf, 2021), explores related issues. Holdt himself has used, semi-ironically, the term "vagabond tourism." [return to page 6]

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The #NODAPL protests from Standing Rock received wide coverage among various media activist groups. (Photograph by Unicorn Riot)



Mountains of siliceous rock waste form the barren landscape of *Men and Dust* (1940).



A workshop teaching community members the basic skills of filming. (Photo courtesy of vartivist).

Front-line reports

review by Victor Wallis

Chris Robé and Stephen Charbonneau, eds., *Insurgent Media from the Front: A Media Activism Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020)

This is a book of front-line reports. As such it offers an indispensable follow-up to the arguments of those — myself among them — who repeatedly call for a tectonic cultural shift but whose efforts in pursuit of that goal rely primarily on already-established channels of communication. By contrast, in the essays collected here by Robé and Charbonneau, we find reports of media-channels being literally *created* — in tune with the lives and hardships of the varied constituencies that organizers are working with.

The essence of "insurgent media" is that its producers integrate themselves into the communities whose voices they seek to project. The book's editors stress at the outset the urgency of this mission, using the qualifier "insUrgent" to evoke (a) the depth of all the anti-oppression struggles that they take up and (b) the extraordinary challenge, in this high-tech era, of achieving "rapid distribution" of counter-hegemonic expressions.

The chapters cover a wide range of cases, focusing notably on issues of colonization, class, culture, sexuality, and healthcare. Special attention is paid to matters of media technology and to the working relationships between producers and their human subjects. There are chapter-length treatments of projects in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Mexico, and the United States. Forms of media activism include filmmaking, festival organizing, a radio station, supershort videos (for Facebook posting), WhatsApp Messaging, and flash mobs.

A major focus of the accounts is difficulties faced by media activists in challenging the dominant narrative (in whatever sphere). One aspect is of course economic: the huge costs entailed in penetrating monopoly-controlled platforms, and doing so quickly enough (in some cases) for the message still to grab people's attention. The other aspect is cultural, and arises in relation to both production and reception. A common concern, especially regarding indigenous subjects, is the need to avoid replicating familiar colonial-type relationships. With all topics, insurgent media activism sets a premium on shared life-experiences between the oppressed and those who seek to give them voice. Ezra Winton, in the chapter on film festivals, gives apt expression to the ethic shared by all the book's contributors: "Imagine festivals whose actions match their purported values" (145).

Throughout the book, we find an effort to remold established genres in order to subvert assumptions fostered by the commercial culture. This is illustrated in an interview with the Ojibway filmmakers Adam and Zack Khalil, who, viewing the typical documentary as misrepresenting indigenous people, suggest that the Ojibway epistemology "has to do with blurring those lines between when you're



UPOEG community leader and political activist Miguel Angel Jiménez Blanco collects voters' testimonies of alleged vote-buying and coercion in San Marcos, Guerrero in June 2015. (Image by Kara Andrade. Mexico, 2015)



Inuk filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril. (Courtesy of Cinema Politica)



Unist'ot'en Resistance Camp. (Credit: Unist'ot'en Tribe)

telling a story and when you're presenting facts, turning things upside down in order to make them clearer in some way" (199). Further, "Creating narratives puts us in a position of autonomy and agency and control" (200).

Not being acquainted with the film of theirs that they're discussing — Empty Metal, which they describe as a fantasy — I cannot comment on the effectiveness of their approach in this particular case. In a larger sense, though, I would question the assumption that presenting facts does not in itself constitute telling a story. What matters about the facts is not their mere presence but rather how authentic they are, how effectively they are depicted, and how persuasively they are put together. While the selection and sequencing of the facts reflects the filmmaker's intervention, the further insertion of clearly fictional ingredients — the "blurring" referred to by Khalil — may end up reducing rather than enhancing the film's impact.

This question is closely tied to another issue discussed in the book, namely, that of the various intended audiences. Is any given work intended more to bolster the commitment of its existing constituency, or to reach out to new people? Of course, both types of communication have their place, but activists still must decide whether the outreach function requires a watering down of their central message. One place this comes up here is in an interview with transgender filmmaker Sam Feder, who argues that in view of the still widespread stigmatization of trans people, they are "not yet authorized to set the terms of [their] own visibility" (71).

A longer-standing history of challenging received assumptions has arisen in struggles over abortion rights. A chapter by film studies professor Angela Aguayo entitled "Subjugated Histories as Affective Resistance" offers an interesting comparison of two 2005 documentaries, *I Had an Abortion* and *The Abortion Diaries*. The discussion is framed by a distinction between "mobility feminist" and "intersectional feminist" approaches, the former referring to the neoliberal model grounded in careerist aspirations, and the latter, to the more universal experience of those women who can't expect to become high social achievers. *I Had an Abortion*, reflecting the mobility approach, includes the testimony of prominent public figures who express satisfaction at not having their careers interrupted. *The Abortion Diaries*, by contrast, based on deeper interaction by the filmmaker (Penny Lane) with her subjects, "allowed for a complex map of emotions to emerge" (60), with the potential for greater resonance.

Insurgent Media from the Front is replete with valuable reports and discussions of the politics of radical media production. The prevailing perspective is well expressed in a chapter on "collaboration across cultures," co-authored by five Australian media activists. As they put it, the attitude of all the human subjects they work with is, "if you have come here to help me, you're wasting your time, but if you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then we can work together" (119).

The political work reflected in this book is integral to the revolutionary transformation on which our species' survival has come to depend. I only wish that the same level of skill, dedication, and sensibility could extend itself toward gathering the protagonists of all these separate struggles into a single all-embracing movement that, while not forgetting the various constituent loyalties, would have the combined power to overwhelm the hegemony of capital.

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Brewster Kahle, during the Zoom interview, July 2021.



"I want a game with many winners." A conversation with Brewster Kahle

by Jeremy Butler

Brewster Kahle is the founder and director of the Internet Archive--an independent library with the admirable goals of (1) preserving the Web and all printed texts and (2) making them freely available. 2021 is the 25th anniversary of the launching of the Internet Archive. This conversation was recorded via Zoom with Kahle in San Francisco, CA, and Butler in Northport, AL, July 2021. It has been lightly edited, mostly for grammatical reasons.

A video of the conversation is available on the Internet Archive.

Kahle: Jeremy!

Butler: Brewster, so nice to meet you.

Kahle: Good to meet you. And I just wanted to say thank you very much for the positive reception on our microfilm project.

Butler: Certainly, I'm a big fan of the Internet Archive and have been for years. Maybe you could fill me in a little bit more about what this microfilm project is?

Kahle: What we're doing is receiving [microfilm], working on the digitization process, and then reaching out to individual publishers to see if we can put the whole thing up. How should we make things accessible? Certainly the public domain, we will give all that away. And then there's... What's the right way for other things? There's interlibrary loan. There's blind and dyslexic. There's machine learning. There's potential for controlled digital lending [CDL]. What are the right ways to go? We're reaching out to some of the publishers, like the Guernsey cow folks.

Butler: Guernsey cows has a publication?

Kahle: It's not for the cows to read.

Butler: We think!

Kahle: Yes, we think! But yes, it's one hundred years of the Guernsey cow. I should share this.

Kahle: Yes, here it is [*Guernsey Breeders' Journal*]. She just made my day. It was, like, we're doing something right here.

Butler: I'm a fan of old texts. Just in general. But I'm particularly a fan of the Internet Archive's collection of genealogical material from around 1910 and earlier, because there's all these enormous, big, fat genealogies that were published back in those days. For an amateur genealogist like me they are a treasure trove.

The reason you reached out to me was because of *Jump Cut*, which is this journal that started in 1974 with three editors, only one of whom is still alive, Julia Lesage. They've never accepted advertising. They've never had a publisher. They've never had an institutional affiliation. And so she was really desperate to

try to find some place to store all of this material from *Jump Cut*. And so I suggested the Internet Archive as being a great fit. And what's really cool about your new microfilm project is that your versions of it are much better than the ones she had. Because what she did for the first 43 print issues is she scanned them, but they're in an odd shape, they're kind of a... They printed the issues on tabloid paper and they're sort of newspaper size, so she only included the text [which had been <code>OCRed</code>]. She didn't include any of the images and it has none of the formatting of the original...

Kahle: Which is so important.

Butler: Right. And so when I looked at the microfilm version, I was really pleasantly surprised at how well the images reproduced, because you never know with microfilm.

Kahle: It's black and white or grayscale. And sometimes the contrasts can be... They could have filmed it with high contrast to really emphasize the text.

Butler: I was very pleasantly surprised at how good it looks. For the first 43 issues your version of it is really quite superior to what Julia had. And then *Jump Cut* made the transition to it being all online in 2001 and they stopped doing the print version. All of the post-2001 online issues have been downloaded as PDFs and then uploaded to a collection on the Internet Archive. A lot of it is already in the Wayback Machine, but...

Kahle: It's surfacing it in those collections that is important. I was just so delighted to go and find your contribution in the Internet Archive.

Butler: Julia's attitude has always been, as she puts it, "Don't be stingy." They've always tried to distribute *Jump Cut* as broadly as possible and at as low cost as possible.

I don't know where this interview might wind up. I retired last summer and one of the things I pledged is I would never write another word of academic prose. So I don't really know what'll happen with this interview. But assuming that it might wind up in *Jump Cut*, what I'd like to talk about first would be your initiative to scan both texts *and* films. Didn't you absorb <u>Rick Prelinger's archive</u>?

Kahle: We actively support it. He's on our board.

Butler: I reached out to Rick about, gosh, must be 30 years ago now because the University of Alabama, where I taught, had hundreds of 16 mm short films, educational films that they used to rent out to schools around the state. So this would be stuff like *How to Brush Your Teeth* and *Duck and Cover*. And you have a beautiful compete short with Disney animation of *The Story of Menstruation*.

So we had all these all these films. And, of course, at that time they were moving everything to videotape and they were about to throw them into the dumpster. So I stopped them and I reached out to Rick and said, is this something that the Prelinger Archives would be interested in? And he said, yeah, great. And so he sent out a truck and took all of these prints with them. So I would assume, actually, that some of those 16mm films...

Kahle: A lot of those are been digitally digitized and put up on the Archive. And a lot of things from that era of his collection ended up at the Library of Congress.

Butler: Do you have any ongoing relationship with the Library of Congress?

Kahle: Absolutely.

Butler: So how does that work?

Kahle: We collect the Web for them, is the biggest thing right now. We used to digitize books inside the Adams Building, which was exciting. Actually, [the Librarian of Congress] Carla Hayden asked me to be on a committee to help modernize the copyright office, which could use it. You know, they're the big boy in our in our area.

Butler: I saw a little video clip of you on your Wikipedia article where you were giving a little tour of your scanning center. And the thing that piqued my curiosity the most about that was somebody was scanning a film that looked like a 16mm film, but it was a home movie. Is this an ongoing initiative of the Internet Archive? Do you want people to send you physical copies of home movies?

Kahle: Yes. I take the lead from Rick Prelinger in this type of area. I had never heard of "ephemeral films" before meeting Prelinger and understanding how important they are for explaining the 20th century. And then when he said, "OK, I'm really going to go into home movies...." Again, I just thought, you're crazy. I think of home movies as those things that your parents did after coming home from a trip. They pull out the screen, turn off the lights, and it's boring to watch your own family, much less somebody else's family's home movies. But then Rick said, no, no, no, it's going to be important. And he did these "Lost Landscapes" series. These are all from home movies of, say, San Francisco, and he's on his 12th year. They sell out the Castro Theater, the largest theater in San Francisco, six months ahead of time in a couple of days.

Butler: Wow!

Kahle: The overflow crowd comes to the Internet archive. That's seven hundred people. If you cut it and contextualize it... Well, actually, he doesn't even really contextualize. He just cuts it and he just puts it up and then people react. Having this experience of watching a movie in a community is something! It's like talking loud in a library. You're not allowed to do that! So he encourages people to call back to the screen and say, "I know what that is! That's this particular corner!" And so he leverages the group to make it an event. It's a film showing as an event. It's brilliant. And he's gone on to do this in many different cities. He recommends that people film bus stations and gas stations and supermarkets and not just birthday parties and zoo visits.

Butler: My grandfather was quite the amateur filmmaker. He was born in 1900 and died in 1965. He was a teacher and he saw every family trip as an opportunity for education. He shot have all sorts of things. He shot the Dionne quintuplets, in Canada. But all it is, is this is very far away shot of a chain link fence and you can see a house in the distance. He also shot footage of FDR when he came to North Dakota, those kind of things. So there are these hidden nuggets within home movies.

Kahle: The new ones are things that we're doing on our phones. And people are

trying to figure out what do they do with those. Some of those get posted on YouTube. YouTube writ large is too big for us, but we try to find the important pieces of YouTube, as evidenced by them being cited in tweets or on the Web, or that librarians say are important. So parts of YouTube, but then that's not getting your family's videos and photos. I'm not sure how much people even relook at their phones' collections. And then those phones die and I think with it goes our family histories.

Butler: My next question would be related to that because, I taught filmmaking when I first started out and I have many friends who teach filmmaking, so is the Internet Archive accepting, say, student films or student projects or...

Kahle: Go to archive.org and in the upper right there's a button says "upload."

Butler: So you don't want the physical copies, though?

Kahle: We're all digital now, right?

Butler: I'm talking about 8mm or Super8 films from the '70s and '80s.

Kahle: Oh yeah. We want we want all those.

Butler: Is the Internet Archive ever going to run out of space?

Kahle: Physical or digital?

Butler: I'm interested in both.

Kahle: Let's take digital. The Internet Archive has got about 70 <u>petabytes</u> of data, stored in multiple locations and spinning on disk. And given the support levels that we have now from end users, donations, and foundations and libraries, we can keep up. We can continue growing. But we do make decisions. We don't collect all of YouTube. When people are posting 24 hour baby cams, this is not going to happen. But text is small, right? There's only seven billion people that can only be typing 60 words a minute, 24 hours a day. So I think we're OK on text. Images, videos come larger. It will really depend on support. And are we relevant? Physically, we started collecting materials a decade ago or more. We're now twenty five years old this year.

Butler: Congratulations.

Kahle: Thank you. So I guess 15 years ago maybe, we would start collecting physical materials and trying to learn how to do that well. Because we see the digital version is the access version, our preservation version can be very dense. And not very accessible. Yes, we know where it is, but we think of it as a preservation function. But we're up to our third warehouse that we've converted into a physical archive to cost-effectively store these materials because libraries are deaccessioning their physical collections at a velocity because digital is so much easier to access with added affordances and search, and you don't have to physically go there, and all sorts of things. That natural transition is on right now. We encourage people to not deaccession and use our technologies for storage. But if they're going to deaccession, deaccession to us. We get several requests a day, or several offers a day, not all of them come through, to take over collections from libraries and individuals. 78 RPM records is a big interest for us.

Butler: They're difficult to store. I mean, they're fragile.

Kahle: If you don't drop them...

Butler: They're brittle.

Kahle: They are brittle. Don't drop them. But they're going to last centuries. These things are hardy, but they only last centuries if we don't throw them away, like

microfilm. Microfilm, I don't know who came up with the number, it'll last for five hundred years. Unless you throw it away. And so we're trying to collect one physical copy of everything ever published.

Butler: Wow.

Kahle: We're not really interested in duplicates unless there's some real reason. And so, one copy of all books, music, video. In physical form.

Butler: Wow. That's very intriguing to me, because, as I mentioned, I retired last summer and so I need to find a new home for my entire home library. I think I found a home on campus here at the University of Alabama. But if not, would that be the sort of thing that...

Kahle: Yes, we get those calls all the time. And what's a lot better is getting that call before people die.

Butler: Why?

Kahle: Because it can be put together to be put away. We try to keep collections whole, which is different from how a lot of places do it. They take things and they distribute it through their physical holdings because their access method is often browsing the stacks. We don't have that. I think some of the interesting nature of what it is we have will be less the individual objects and more the collections.

Butler: Interesting.

Kahle: So when we digitize, we go and keep things in collections so it can be your collection of books and other materials around your subject area. That I think will be more and more what is interesting to future scholars.

Butler: I'll spread the word because there are a lot of my contemporaries who are retiring now. And like me, they really don't plan to do academic research in the future. The Tuscaloosa Public Library doesn't want my books. And it's funny, I have long runs of academic journals. Nobody wants those. [Kahle raises his hand.] I'm afraid it's a little too late for most of them. I gave a long run of *Screen* to Rick Prelinger.

Kahle: That's something he would love. So we are now, as you know with *Jump Cut*, our anchor of our periodical collection is based on microfilm collections, and now we're starting to receive donations of... We want complete runs, if at all possible, or at least long runs, but we're getting them by the shipping container now. That's good because they're just being dispensed. We want them and then we're trying to actively collect everything we can from online in the Wayback Machine. And now we have scholar.archive.org that's really focused on open access to resources that aren't naturally in other preservation programs.

Butler: I just recently found scholar.archive.org, which I guess is kind of in beta.

Kahle: Yeah, that's still new.

Butler: Can you describe that a little bit more for me? Because like I say, I just found out about it yesterday, I'm not really clear on its purpose.

Kahle: Yeah, it's two components. It's attempting to pull together articles, information about articles that we don't have and things that are in the Wayback Machine and point to them. The Wayback Machine is so large that it's hard for people to move through it. So this is an index into the Wayback Machine and it also helps guide our collecting practices. When we discover new URLs [Website addresses], we will know if we already have it. It's not a competitor for Google Scholar, but it has a lot of things that Google scholar doesn't have yet. We hope to integrate these collections into Google Scholar because they've got so much more traffic than we do.

Butler: So I know there's some almost competitive stuff going on between you and Google's scanning projects, but you also are cooperating in certain ways or not?

Kahle: They have scanned so much more than we have in terms of their library project, but they're not very available.

Kahle: I don't have a institutional subscription to <u>Hathi Trust</u>. So how do we get access to these things? It's really good for the elites that are in high-end colleges that can afford those, but what about the rest of us? So, I commend what Google has scanned and done, but I'd at least like to see the public domain be publicly accessible.

Butler: I don't get that. And it's frustrating. You go look up some 1910 book and all you get is a limited preview, if that.

Kahle: They got sued for years and years and years from the Authors Guild and the publishers. Years! I don't know how many tens of millions of dollars they spent on that—just on the lawsuit. That's not good. But we do like working with Google whenever we can and we hope to work with Scholar more.

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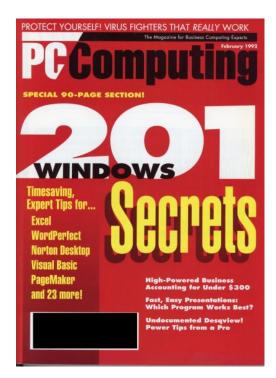


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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Brewster Kahle, during the Zoom interview, July 2021.



Butler: Since you brought up the Wayback Machine, let me ask you a couple of questions about that attempt to preserve all of the Web, because I think that was probably how I was first introduced to the Internet Archive. This is your 25th anniversary and so it's 1996 that you started.

This is my favorite quotation of all time about the impermanence of digital data [illustrating the need for Web preservation]. It's by <u>Penn Jillette</u>, who, as you may remember, used to write a column in <u>PC Computing</u>... the final page of <u>PC Computing</u>...

And so in 1992 he wrote a column where he was advising the woman from *The Howard Stern Show*, Robin Quivers, about buying a new computer. 1992. So it's pretty early in *personal* computer purchasing days. She said she was worried about losing things she was writing. Jillette writes, "I told her that with proper backup it was safer than paper, which is true if you're scrawling on tissue on the edge of the Grand Canyon in gale winds without a paperweight and the mighty Colorado is on fire." That's my all time favorite computer quote.

Kahle: Let me just look that up, if I could. I don't know if we had PC World.

Butler: It was *PC Computing*, and you have a very limited run of *PC Computing* on the Internet Archive. That's where I looked first. But then I found a link on the Wayback Machine to a really old Sin City website that had collected the text of *all* of Penn Jillette essays.



We're All Going to Hell

by Penn Jillette

"The end justifies the means" - is the concept that allowed Woodward and Burnstein to do some pretty iffy things to bring down Nixon for believing "the end justifies the means" (Hey, I know from recursive - I've read "Godel, Escher, Bach:"). It's doesn't hold water as a philosophical position but we all live by it. One more happy computer end user -justifies the means of lying our asses off.

My dedication is not a secret. I write this damn back page (it mentions computers occasionally). On airplanes, I carry a painted Zen Mastersport, bright pink with a grinning devil that always makes the flight attendants smile and give me extra hickory smoked nuts. I can work computers into any conversation ("Yeah, I guess I'm glad David Duke lost too, he was a racist Nazi - but, did you know he had one of the best organized data bases in politics?").

When friends or acquaintances decide that now's the time to get into computers (these are the same people that decide now's the time for Dylan to go electric) - they talk to me.

The most recent person seeking advice was Robin Quivers, Howard Stern's radio and TV sidekick. The first thing we had to do was decide between LB.M and Apple. I gave her the "religion rap" - I told her that choice of hardware was really an emotional, illogical, religious thing and that once people had bought a Mac or a PC, they committed to that camp and couldn't see the other side. I, of course, could see both sides. I predicted the "Apple People" (intoned so it sounds like a synonym for "fruit cakes") would explain "user friendly" and show her little Sesame Street pictures of trash cans and stupid thought bubbles with sleeping Z's in them. I added that if she liked the stupid user friendly toys that she could put Windows into a PC (I didn't mention that I've had Windows for a few months and can't get it to work, at least not fast enough - but that's probably just me, I only have 8 meg of RAMO.

"We" concluded that it didn't really make very much difference so she should just go with what the people around her had (I already knew that Howard and K-ROQ had PCs).

She worried that it was just too much to learn. I told her, in a grave voice, that for the first week she would be spending most her time learning to use the computer and wouldn't get much work done. It slipped my mind that for the next year she would just be getting things set up right and then she'd be getting all new hardware and software and, after 257 weeks, I felt I was really going to get some serious work done any minute now.

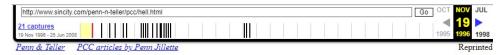
She said she worried about losing things she was writing. I told her that with "proper backup" (try to say that without laughing) it was safer than paper. Which is true if you're scrawling on tissue on the edge of the Grand Canyon, in gale winds, without a paperweight, and the mighty Colorado is on fire.

She said she worried that it would break all the time. I just shrugged, I didn't think she needed to know that at that instant, the new memory in my Dell was making something crash, my new Zen wouldn't talk to my desktop and my Amiga wouldn't even boot up. That's why I had time for lunch.

She'll buy soon, and right after that, she'll be turning someone else on to the wonders of computers

Kahle: Oh, nice.

Butler: This is where I finally tracked it down. It was at SinCity.com, which is long gone. As you can see from the capture timeline thingamajigger. What do you call that little...?



Kahle: The spark line.

Butler: As you can see it, this Website died somewhere around here 2003. The Wayback Machine is where I found Jillette online.

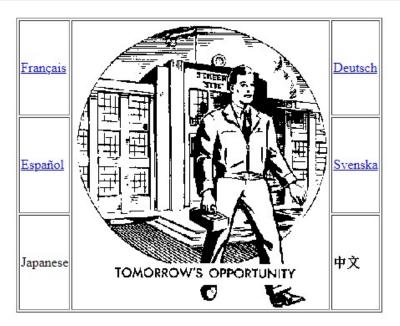
Kahle: Well, put it in your article.

Butler: Oh, yeah. Without the Wayback Machine I would have been lost. Then I went on eBay just this morning actually and bought a physical copy of that *PC Computing* issue so I could have that article [see below or <u>read the PDF</u>].

Kahle: Fantastic!



Butler: The same year, well, two years before the launch of the Internet Archive, I built my first website, which was for film and TV studies, the area I'm in, and I called it ScreenSite.org. So here it is, in all its 1996



Welcome to SCREENsite

You'll want to start your exploration of SCREENsite with our <u>Table of Contents</u>-although you may also jump directly to our <u>searchable index</u>. Some day, maybe while you're waiting for bread to rise, experience the excitement that is our <u>Acknowledgements</u> page.

Kahle: Nice looking.

Butler: I was so excited to be able to have actual images on the site. I recently redid ScreenSite. It still exists. I redid it one more time before I retired and my backup of this 1996 version was on floppy disks that I could no longer access. So I went to the Wayback Machine

Kahle: How'd we do?

Butler: You're looking at the product from the Wayback Machine right now. So this whole thing is Wayback-Machine-generated. From July 1st, 1996.

One of the questions I had for you about the Wayback Machine is a little more on the technical side. In '96... a few JPEGs, all text, it was pretty simple to capture a Web page, but now you've got all this <u>JavaScript</u>, you've got <u>CSS</u>, you've got all this kind of stuff going on. It's obviously becoming more difficult to capture a Web page. Is it becoming impossible?

Kahle: There are certainly things that are technically difficult and then there are paywalls. We have an ever growing number of engineers trying to figure out how to do rich media sites and JavaScript and Ajax. I'd say about paywalls... I love the line from [Nathan J. Robinson, *Current Affairs*], "The truth is paywalled, but the lies are free."

Butler: That all leads me to another question I have which is a little more historical one, since your career, your involvement with online stuff started back with some sort of Gopher-type thing called <u>WAIS</u>. [Gopher was online information software developed by the University of Minnesota before protocols for the World Wide Web came to dominate.]

Kahle: WAIS is "wide area information servers." Before the web.

Butler: Exactly. So before the Web, in the dial-up days, the <u>BBS</u> days, where we had these commercial silos: <u>America Online (AOL)</u>, <u>GEnie</u>, <u>CompuServe</u>. So we moved from that to the freely available Internet and now it seems like we're just going back into the freaking silos again.

Kahle: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. No, you're absolutely right. Mainframes. What is AWS [Adobe Web Services] other than a mainframe? Now at a global scale. The walled gardens, the promises of safety and security, it's all reminiscent of the battles with AOL and CompuServe and Prodigy. And that everything's going to be mediated on somebody else's platform is sort of reminiscent of LexisNexis or Dialog [now owned by ProQuest]. Our mantra in the early 90s was "Everyone's a publisher." And that enabling aspect, whether it was from 'zines or early Websites or WordPress sites, LiveJournal... these things where you can even host your own server, like WordPress. That was the dream. And Google was part of that era of trying to make it so that openness works and so were we.

My whole career has really been about trying to get the open world to work. *I want a game with many winners* [emphasis added]. I want an environment where people can be their most. They can be at their best. That they share in an enduring way. That the good works of Penn Jillette, or Jeremy Butler from 1996, will find their rightful audience or their justified obscurity. Maybe it's just your great grandkids are going to be looking up your ratings from 1996 but they should be there. That they have a place in the library. It's not just those with New York book contracts. It's not just those that are famous professors. We have histories that we can relate. Everyone has something to teach. If we can build technologies that go and put people on their best. And support their best. Then we're in great shape as a society. If we make technologies that make them just yell and shout and curse. Storm around, demand whatever, we're making technologies that don't serve us well.

Butler: It's a lot like Julia says, "Don't be stingy," to just let stuff out there. And that was my goal when I founded the ScreenSite. And I also founded the first film and TV studies [email] <u>LISTSERV</u> (<u>Screen-L</u>) and those sorts of things.

Kahle: I think Caralee [a writer who works for the Internet Archive] may have talked to you about doing a blog post.

Butler: We talked last Monday

Kahle: I changed the <u>Internet Archive Blog</u> post draft. I just changed the title and then put in a new first paragraph. See if this works for you: "Jump Cut journal is a model open journal by hosting on archive.org and now digitized from microfilm." And that's the title. And then: "Jump Cut is the model of open access journals. When the Internet Archive digitized older issues of Jump Cut from microfilm, we found that it had already been posted in textual form by the publisher. When we reached out to see if we could open up the microfilm version for free public access and download they were enthusiastic."

Butler: That's right.

Kahle: "Here we wanted to share some more background on *Jump Cut* and why openness is important for them."

Butler: That's absolutely right.

Kahle: It's just the only way to work on the Internet. It's the only way to make it work. But there are organizations that are really not going that way.

Butler: I know you also work with the <u>Electronic Frontier Foundation</u>, of which I have a bumper sticker on my car right now. Longtime supporter. I don't want to take up too much more of your time, but I have two final questions that may be

too big for this discussion. But let me launch them at you and you can tell me how much you want to go into him.

The first would be whether you had any thoughts about ongoing consequences of the usage spike that the Internet Archive had due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People are talking a lot about not having academic conferences anymore and just doing everything on Zoom and things like that. Is it too early to be able to tell whether that spike is going to continue for Internet Archive?

Kahle: We're all home schoolers now, right? We're all adjusting and have had to jerk into a new world and some of that world is better. There was a lot of just flying around, going to these random conferences that you're expected to go to, and we don't need to do that as much. I'm trying to put myself on a flight diet. Can I just fly 12 segments a year? I don't know what I was doing before, but it was a lot higher. So let's make it count.

Butler: Yeah, that makes sense.

Kahle: I think it was just gorging on travel. Decreasing commuting would be great.

But what's the right blend? Heck, if I know. The Internet Archive is gone remote first, which means that the assumption is remote.

Butler: Oh, you mean in terms of your employees?

Kahle: Yeah.

Butler: But how does that work for the scanning project, because they need to physically...

Kahle: Yeah, the scanning is physically places, but they're all over the place. We have 20 scanning centers in all sorts of libraries.

Butler: I'm constantly impressed with the quality of the scans that we're able to get now.

Kahle: Well, thank you.

Butler: And it makes me wonder how you feel about those older scans. You still have the physical book, are you ever going to go back and scan or OCR [optical character recognition]?

Kahle: We do. We reprocess and we try not to rescan if we can avoid it. But depending on costs and availability. Hopefully it'll become easier to scan again. That's why we physically own these things, this may not be the last time this is done

Butler: Right. And you look at something like the text on this page [from the *Jewelers' Circular and Horological Review*, 1893], so itty bitty. OCR would have just thrown up all over it 20 years ago.



Kahle: But now it's gotten really good.

Butler: It's astonishing.

Kahle: It is astonishing. And the open source OCR is now really good based on machine learning and actually supported by Google. They supported the open-source OCR. That's really great.

Butler: The last big question I have for you, and like I say, feel free to comment as little or as much as you want about this is, the <u>Digital Millennium Copyright Act [DMCA]</u> was enacted two years after you guys started. Did it have an immediate impact on the Internet Archive in '98? And from the perspective of 23 years later, is it good or is it evil, the DMCA?

Kahle: Ben Franklin-era copyright was 14 years renewable once and derivative works "okay!" By the time we got to 1998, it had stretched and stretched and stretched to life plus 50. It just goes on for a hundred years. There's no [copyright] registration. It's just... It got mauled. And so the "notice and takedown" approach has made the Internet that we have today. [Editor's note: The DMCA provides a "safe harbor" for sites like the Internet Archive, allowing them to present works of unknown copyright status; if a copyright holder objects to a specific item on a site, it may request it be taken down.] That and CDA 230 [Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act] those are those are foundational laws for having an open Internet, otherwise, it could have been a lot more like cable television, or controlled environments like Nintendo. It's just, it's only the things that are on the

store shelf.

And I grew up with that. And there is no way of getting your words seen. Maybe I was in a group picture of our soccer team in high school in the town newspaper. But that was it. And maybe they spelled my name right in the caption. But that was my only access towards getting my words out. We're so much further than that and actually it's a large part because of some early leadership in the United States by the government to try to live in open world. Does it mean that it's all perfect? No. Have people abused it? Yes. Should we go back to the world that I grew up in? Hell, no!

Butler: I guess when I ask if it's evil is that it does seem to have had some chilling effect on fair use and things like that... the DMCA.

Kahle: We're trying. I think we just we have to keep some of the very lucrative lobbying opportunities under control. There was a study recently done and I don't think is public yet, that the content industry has spent over a billion dollars in the last 10 years on lobbying Congress. Where is the public interest in that? I think some of those early laws, if they were to try to be done today, would be just lobbied out of existence.

Butler: I guess for the Internet Archive, the "safe harbor" provision is useful perhaps.

Kahle: It's very useful. I was unaware of all of that in those early days, but other people were. We just try to be a library. What does a library do? It buys things. It gets donations of things. It preserves that. And it lends them out. That's what we do! Until somebody tells me that there's not going to be libraries in the future in the digital world, we're going to continue doing it. And there are people that are arguing that there shouldn't be libraries in the digital world. And I disagree. Let's make sure libraries thrive, that they're supported by the community, that they are supporting creative industries. It is the biggest form of public funding of publishing there is.

Butler: That's right.

Kahle: Let's not lose that.

Butler: There are legions of fans, I think, like me out there that appreciate the work you've done. It's really astonishing to me.

Kahle: Thank you for that. We live for comments like that. There is no gold at the end of the rainbow in a nonprofit.

As we shut this down... You have a video of this, right? It's being recorded.

Butler: Yeah.

Kahle: Would you would you mind posting it to the Archive?

Butler: Sure. I'm surprised you would want it, but I'd be happy to do so.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Edison Manufacturing Company's *Carmencita* (dir. William K.L. Dickson, 1894) is one of the earliest examples of dance on film.



Fred Astaire's ceiling dance in the Hollywood musical *Royal Wedding* (dir. Stanley Donen, 1951) and Talley Beatty's inter-spatial performance in *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (dir. Maya Deren, 1945) exemplify the centrality of dance to both commercial and avantgarde film history in the United States.

Screen/dance in the United States: engaging the moving bodies in moving pictures

roundtable with Pamela Krayenbuhl, Hilary Bergen, Colleen Dunagan, Anthea Kraut, Brynn Shiovitz, Sylvie Vitaglione

This is an edited transcript of a roundtable that took place over Zoom at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Annual Conference on April 2, 2022. The roundtable was titled "Screendance in the U.S.: Body Politics in and Beyond Hollywood."

Pamela: Hello! I am your host, Pamela Krayenbuhl. I'm an Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Washington Tacoma. My research focuses on the history, aesthetics, and politics of dancing bodies in film, television, and new media. My recent article, "The Dance Company Film," just came out in the Spring/Summer 2022 issue of *The Journal of Film and Video*, and I'm working on a monograph about dance performances of race and/as masculinity in mid-century U.S. film and TV.

Dance has been a persistent interest of filmmakers since the medium's very inception. And it was certainly crucial to both the Hollywood musical and avantgarde works, such as those of Maya Deren. In fact, Douglas Rosenberg's introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* (2016) understands these two types of film—mainstream/commercial and avant-garde—to represent the "twin lineages" of screendance, an art form broadly defined by moving images and moving bodies that are actively engaged with one another choreographically. [1] [open endnotes in new window] Despite its parallel and intertwined lineages rooted firmly in film history, most scholarly work on screendance has emerged from dance studies, including our subfield's primary journal, the *International Journal of Screendance*, so my main goal in organizing this roundtable is to take a first step toward increasing engagement with this subject in film and media studies.

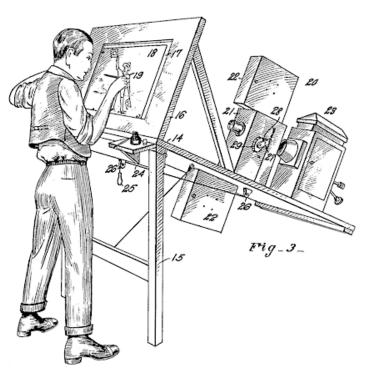
In my own past decade of development as a dance media scholar, I was lucky to find a scattered group of film researchers who have done great work examining dance's relation with screens. But in all my years presenting on dance at SCMS, I've never actually been in a panel where *all* of the papers were about dance. So let me briefly describe what goes on in our little subfield. Working at the intersection of these two art forms and fields of inquiry has allowed us to begin unpacking the unique ways that, on the one hand, dance has done crucial meaning-making in filmic texts, and on the other hand, the ways that film and its descendants have manipulated and enhanced the actor's flesh and blood body to achieve impossible

feats. As may become apparent, this critical work often requires mixed methods, using not only historiography, formal analysis, and an attentiveness to medium specificity, but also dance studies' method of movement analysis.

So now I am thrilled to introduce you to this deeply interdisciplinary group who will be discussing one major avenue through which screendance helps us to better understand the politics of entertainment media writ large: the moving body. Specifically, our focus today is the always-already political re-production of dancing bodies via film, television, and new media, focusing on the U.S. context. We attend to these apparatuses' exploitation of racialized and gendered dancing bodies, as well as to their reproduction of the white, heteropatriarchal status quo under neoliberal capitalism. Some of our animating questions include: Who gets to dance on commercial media screens? Who dances behind the screen? Who profits from that labor? What happens in the process of indexing some aspects (but not others) of a live dancer? How does the movement vocabulary, style, and tone of a dance obscure the offscreen realities that undergird it? In short, what is unique to screendance that nevertheless sheds light on larger structural issues?

Those and a few more questions probably undergird us today, so let me go ahead and introduce the first speaker.

Hilary Bergen is an SSHRC-funded PhD candidate in Interdisciplinary Humanities at Concordia University, Montreal, where she studies screendance and media history. She has published work with *PUBLIC*, *Screening the Past, Culture Machine*, *The Dance Current* and *Archée*. Her interests include animated and digital embodiment, dance notation, motion capture technology and virality. Her dissertation is on a posthuman theory of dance.



Patent drawing for Max Fleischer's original rotoscope featuring a transparent easel onto which a single movie frame is projected so that the artist can trace the body in the frame. "METHOD OF PRODUCING MOVING-PICTURE CARTOONS," patented 9 October 1917, USA.

Hilary: I research the relation between dance and animation methods such as rotoscoping and Mocap, where gestural data is extracted from a dancer's body in order to enliven a cartoon character or digital avatar. Both these methods of animation, which abstract dancers into nonhuman figures and even lines and



Screenshot from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Walt Disney, 1937) layered on top of a

still image of Marge Champion dancing. Footage of Champion was used (via rotoscoping) to animate the dance sequences performed by Snow White in the 1937 film.

patterns in motion, rely on dance as a kind of *life-force* that can be drawn out of the individual dancer, whose sweat, breath and embodiment are erased in the process. These animation methods use different approaches to reach the same goal: to leave the referent human body behind while retaining traces of its liveliness.



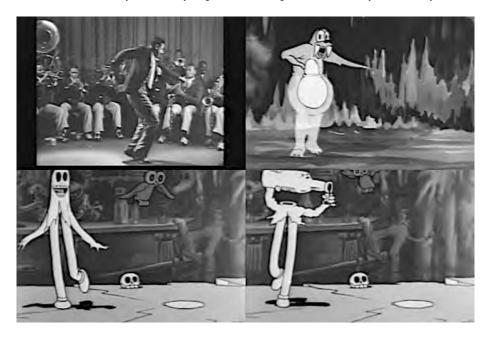
Side by side comparison of animated Snow White, and the footage of Marge Champion that was rotoscoped to animate the sequence.

Panpan Yang writes about the "secret dancers" of early rotoscoping, many of whom animated cartoons using the motion of their own bodies.[1a] These dancers were secret because they were rarely acknowledged in the film's final product yet they supplied something essential to its characters. It was their unique movements, traced frame by frame, that breathed life into inanimate drawings. Marge Champion who, at fourteen years old provided dance footage for Disney's animated heroine Snow White, was never credited in the final film version and was asked by Disney to stay quiet about her involvement. By erasing Champion's embodied presence—which lent an essential quality to the character—Disney worked to imbue the animation itself with virtuosic realism, illustrating the common disregard for dance as labor.



Side by side comparison: Cab Calloway with his band, left, and a still from *Betty Boop: Snow White* (1933), right. In this scene, Koko the Clown transforms into a ghost and sings St. James Infirmary Blues. His movements are rotoscoped from Cab Calloway's body in performance.

African American Jazz bandleader Cab Calloway was another of these secret dancers. He provided his own highly recognizable movements to Koko the Clown, an animated character designed by Max Fleischer who danced in three episodes of the *Betty Boop* cartoon.



A collage of four different iterations of Cab Calloway: his dancing body in live performance (top left), a walrus (top right), a long-legged ghost (bottom left), and a beheaded creature whose head has become a bottle (bottom right). This sequence shows the expressive plasticity of Calloway's animated form.

Rotoscoping eventually fell out of popularity as an animation technique, and was largely replaced by motion capture (mocap), a much more efficient method offering nearly real-time results. Mocap, which is used in military, sports and medical applications as well as in robotics, became an integral part of video game design in the 1990s.



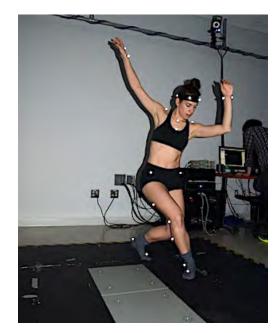
An illustration of the motion capture (mocap) process in which data points are extracted from a moving human body and used to animate a digital avatar. (Wikicommons).



Andy Serkis animates Gollum, a digital creature, via mocap in production stills from Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001).

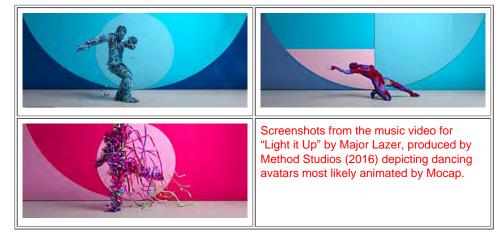
Filmmakers like James Cameron and Peter Jackson also used mocap to infuse the characters in *Avatar* and *Lord of the Rings* with human-like movement and liveliness. When an actor or dancer provides their gestural movements for a mocap animation, they often perform within a black box surrounded by cameras and wearing a mocap suit—a tight-fitting black leotard with sensors placed at specific points on the joints of the limbs, across the torso, and on the head. The sensors are registered by the cameras as coordinates in space or data points, and these coordinates can then be mapped onto a digital avatar, making it move. The technique of motion capture is highly technical and requires patience and precision.

Techniques like rotoscoping and mocap allow movement to spill over and beyond



Photograph of myself (Hilary Bergen) dancing in a mocap lab, outfitted in mocap sensors, at Concordia University's PERFORM Centre, Montréal, 2015. Photo by Emilié St. Hilaire.

the bounds of moving bodies, and mocap in particular has a special relationship to plasticity. Drawn from data, mocap movement is not felt on the lively contours of the animated body but emanates from an unseen core, no matter what entity hosts the dance. Take, for example, the music video for Major Lazer's song "Light it Up" (2016) by Method Studios and House of Moves, in which animated bodies made of typically inanimate objects (ribbons, feathers, cotton candy) perform anthropomorphic dance sequences and then explode and fall to pieces. The video begins with a series of shots of textured fabrics and materials in motion. As they ripple and pulsate, these shots, which take up the entire screen, illustrate the agency of non-human substances. When the first dancers appear on screen, it is not immediately clear whether they are humans wearing (digitally enhanced) costumes or very high-quality animations. Mocap makes so many different types and shapes of bodies possible in "Light it Up," and the music video also presents a world in which gender and race are technically nonexistent.

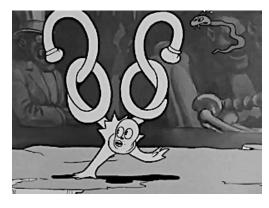


I think these methods of animation—rotoscoping and mocap—speak to two (somewhat conflicting) desires. The first is to free dance from the singular and limited human form, and the second is to use extracted dance as a kind of "grain" or kernel of the body, to infuse the non-human form with a human-like essence or emotional quality, or some might even say soul.

I'm playing here with what Roland Barthes calls "the grain of the voice," which he argues is produced by the materiality of the body:

"the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs." [2]

Similarly, the residue of the material, dancing body carries over to the animated form, producing a kind of soul in the nonhuman entity. This "grain" exists in





Koko the Clown's dancing body morphs into a ghost with looping legs and then into a pendant on a chain in *Betty Boop's Snow White* (1933). Screenshot from YouTube.



Reclining, Madonna surrenders to the camera's gaze in "Vogue" (1990). Directed by David Fincher.

tension with the malleable and virtuosic embodiments possible in animated works. In her book *The Animatic Apparatus*, Levitt argues that animation is an "increasingly powerful pop cultural form" that contributes to the way we perceive life today as "plastic, transformative and an-ontological," or without being.[3] She writes,

"There is no death in animation, because there is no being—no existence—to begin with. There are no necessarily limiting features, no essential finitude—everything is shadowed by its possible metamorphosis, erasure, and resurrection—and there is thus no ontology."[4]

In my research I explore the relationship between animated dance and ontology, asking: How does motion-captured dance both propose a fantasy of non-being and virtuosic abstraction *and* ground that fantasy in the material, embodied labor of the dancer?

In the larger project of my dissertation, I examine the relationship between dance and *anima* (the Latin word for soul), and I think about the ways that dance acts as a kind of immaterial substance that can travel between bodies (organic, digital, animated, screen-based, etc.). This follows Aristotle's notion of soul or anima as a "mobile energy that is independent from the bodies it infuses" but nonetheless can traverse between bodies.[5] Here, kinesis (movement) is the "core of animation" and of life. I'm interested not only in the types of new "life" possible in this space, but the ways in which that "life" is contingent on the erasure of particular living, breathing, *dancing* bodies who labor to produce it.

I'm very excited to hear from the rest of the panelists, and I'll just sort of put a provocation out, which is that I'm very interested in dance as a labor that is at once hyper-visible and also, in many ways, invisible, especially within this animated sphere. But I think we'll see this is true across many different mediums and practices as well.

Pamela: Our next speaker is Colleen Dunagan, who is a Professor in the Department of Dance at California State University, Long Beach, where currently she serves as Acting Associate Dean of the College of the Arts. Her publications include *Consuming Dance: Choreography and Advertising* (2018) and contributions to several edited collections. Her current work examines the reproduction of racialized and sexualized corporeal spectacle within media and consumer culture.

Colleen: Hello. Thank you. I'm at the beginning of this project and at an early stage, so rather than present a finished product, I'm going to share the questions that I'm asking as I look at spectacle and dance as spectacle inside of various mass media forms.

One question I've been interested in since beginning to write about dance in television and online advertising is: Do we use the spectacle of song and dance to create awe as a way of minimizing the impact of meaning? In other words, does it nullify or dissipate the impact of the content? This question aligns with the historical tensions between "technique" and "narrative" within the development



Beyoncé drapes backwards, inviting the camera's gaze in "Déja Vu" (2006). Directed by Sophie Muller.



Vogue dancers perform in Madonna's "Vogue."



Featured dancer Danielle Polanco performs alongside other vogue dancers in Beyoncé's "Get Me Bodied" (2007). Directed by Anthony Mandler and Beyoncé. Choreography by Frank Gatson Jr., Rhapsody James, Todd Sams, and Clifford McGhee.

of ballet as a theatrical form, as well as historical debates surrounding the role of spectacle within the "narrative/number" distinction of film musicals, distinctions between the conceptual model of the cinema of attractions and narrative cinema, and Laura Mulvey's initial conception of the male gaze. However, asking this question routinely returns me to questioning the value of the question.

In examining the role of dance in advertising, I found, as others have, that expression through music and dance taps into affect, potentially triggering a response in the audience and adding emotion, agency, and subjectivity to the point that the spectacle of dance (the excess it brings through its stylization of the body) can be empowering, even as it potentially produces an awe and an emphasis on surface appearance that possesses the ability to entertain without enabling meaning making.[6]

For me, advertising highlights the possibility that spectacle allows us to commodify diverse bodies and expressive cultures, even as it raises awareness, produces new representations, and materially and/or emotionally empowers individuals and communities. Correspondingly, I'm interested in the history of spectacle as a production of agency grounded in the production of self as object. I'm particularly interested in how this plays out in relationship to feminisms and the construction and maintenance of hegemonic concepts of femininity and female sexuality. Likewise, I'm interested in how this construction is racialized and tied to histories of colonialism, capitalism, and consumer culture, and how aggregate structures of film and television intersect with the aggregate structure of spectacle and consumption.

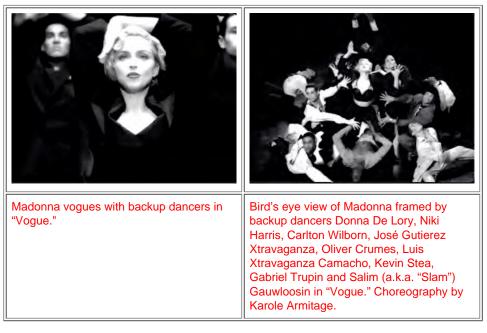
In looking at the role spectacle plays in constructions of the feminine, I'm asking how the history of spectacle as agency, as a strategy for asserting agency, is reliant on a construction of female sexuality grounded in the construction of whiteness as achieved through practices of orientalism and colonialism's anti-blackness. And while I'm interested in examining the role of corporeal spectacle in contemporary popular culture through pop stars such as Madonna and Beyoncé, I'm drawn to looking at these pop stars' relation to the larger history of celebrity culture and its theatrical lineages, such as the rise of burlesque in the United States and related historical social choreographies of female sexuality.

At the same time, I find my desire to trouble the empowerment that is a potential within gender spectacles problematic as I consider cultural forms such as voguing, given the role spectacle plays within the form. For example, Madison Moore argues,

"Within the world of queer performance being 'that bitch' is about having an exacting, unquestionable creative juice and asserting yourself through performance and style...[where] being 'that bitch' is about queer livelihood and ethical self-making...and [essentially about finding ways to] exist in a world with norms that were not created with you in mind in the first place."[7]

If empowerment via self-definition lies in corporeal performances of gender within marginalized communities, such as ball culture and voguing, then what might be the significance of tracing constructions of white female sexuality-as-empowerment from white co-optations of Black and POC culture to Black/POC queerings of those representations? And how might my critiques of consumer culture's use of corporeal spectacles offer avenues for progressive change without disempowering those who rely on it for affirming their voice and the agency?

In this presentation I'm showing Madonna's *Vogue* because it borrows from a marginalized culture, but if one were unaware of voguing and ball culture when the video came out, one would have had no way of knowing what the history of the form was or from where the corporeal embodiment was derived. And thus, one might watch the video and have no sense of the role that the dance form played within queer Black and Latinx communities in New York.



Thus, through the spectacle of dancing bodies, the music video participates in a kind of disavowal of voguing's history and the construction of Madonna's white femininity through her difference in relationship to the backup dancers. Bodily spectacle both distracts from and activates meaning(s).

Ok, I'm going to stop right there.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Pamela: Our next speaker is Anthea Kraut, who is a Professor in the Department of Dance at UC Riverside, where she teaches courses in critical dance studies. Her publications include *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Her current work examines the reproduction of corporeality through the figure of the Hollywood dance-in.

Anthea: Thank you so much again, Pam, for organizing us, and thank you to my co-panelists, with whom I'm delighted to be in dialogue. My comments today address what I see as the need to think with and across dance studies, film studies, and critical race studies in our approaches to corporeality. I'm currently working on a project on dance-ins in Hollywood musicals in the middle decades of the 20th century. A cross between dance doubles and stand-ins, dance-ins executed choreography in place of stars when cameras were being focused and lights were being set, and when stars were needed elsewhere. They also often served as choreographers, assistants, and coaches, and thus played an important role in the transmission of choreography to stars. Dance-ins were probably used whenever there was a major dance number in a film. Rarely acknowledged let alone credited, they occupy only the margins of the archives. My proposal is that this figure who barely registers in dance studies or film studies can place productive pressure on our notions of the body by forcing us to account for the reproductions, exchanges, and displacements that undergirded and were concealed by images of seemingly autonomous bodies.

In dance studies, the body is arguably one of our basic units of analysis; it often serves as both object and method of study. Dance studies is a relatively young field, certainly younger and smaller than film studies, and dance scholars often find themselves needing to argue for the legitimacy of what we do. Dance studies is also a field that has been dominated by white women—a dynamic that those of us representing dance studies here today reproduce. These disciplinary contexts, I believe, are relevant to what I have also begun to perceive as a lack of sufficiently critical scrutiny of what we mean by "the body." Because we are constantly *justifying* scholarly study of the body, and because of our white privilege and unexamined assumptions, I think we've taken too much for granted about the body, including an idea of it as bounded, coherent, and the locus of individuality. This is a decidedly Eurocentric conceptualization of the body that obscures other understandings of corporeality. Its very pervasiveness also conceals how constructed it is and how it has served to shore up structures of racial domination. This is what I think the dance-in can help us see more clearly.

Let me hasten to add that there *are* dance scholars who have explored more expansive conceptualizations of the body, and this is especially true of work on screendance, where scholars like Douglas Rosenberg and Addie Tsai, for example, have pointed to screendance's potential to unmoor notions of bodies from "somatic" and "corporeal" absolutes, and in the case of digital media in particular, to shift our sense of the "real" body.[8] [open endnotes in new window]

Yet most of these theorizations are anchored in analyses of on-screen representations of bodies and preserve a sense of opposition between "live dance" and its "mediated other." Missing for me is a more robust consideration of how the material bodies that gave rise to screen images are themselves already



Marie Bryant, left, as the maid Elsa, along with Betty Grable and Victor Mature in *Wabash Avenue* (1950). **Bryant served as Grable's dance coach i**n her uncredited capacity as assistant to choreographer Billy Daniels.



Betty Grable, left, with her long-time dance-in Angie Blue. From a January 1949 issue of *Photoplay*. Photographer unknown.



From left to right: Carol Haney, Alex Romero, Vera-Ellen, and Gene Kelly in the "Day in New York" number in *On the Town* (1949). Haney and Romero also worked as Kelly's assistants and dance-ins.

mediated by discourse and ideology, as well as by techniques of dance training and by technologies of film or video production.

And this is where the coming together of dance studies methods of attending to the material practices that shape dancing bodies with production studies methods of making visible hidden labor feels particularly important. Even if, as I am contending, dance studies needs to interrogate how our conceptions *of* corporeality shape our assertions *about* corporealities, the attention dance scholars pay to off-stage processes of training and rehearsal is a crucial complement to the attention production studies scholars pay to industry labor practices and especially to below-the-line workers.[9]

If, as Miranda Banks has asserted, feminist production studies highlights production at the margins, [10] what I'm advocating for is a feminist production studies approach to production at the margins of screen dancing bodies and screen bodies more generally, asking questions about the unseen bodies who surround, prop up, and leave their traces on the images of bodies that circulate via the screen. Again, to be clear, there are some dance scholars already doing this work, including our co-panelist Brynn Shiovitz and Sima Belmar, as well as some film scholars working on dance, like Usha Iyer.[11]

In the case of my own research, I'm interested in how the swapping of places between dance-ins and stars can complicate our understanding of the relations between center and margin. While stars in mid-century Hollywood were overwhelmingly white, attention to the dancers working behind the camera demonstrates that the corporeal ecosystem in Hollywood was more racially diverse than the segregation of bodies on film would otherwise suggest. [12] Likewise, while film choreographers were overwhelmingly male, they often relied on women dancers to do the work of preparing stars for dance numbers. [13] On the one hand, then, dance-ins destabilize racial and gender hierarchies by showing how white stars' dancing bodies depended on the reproductive labor of multiracial men and women who assisted white men choreographers. At the same time, the institutionalized forgetting or downplaying of dance-ins' labor has functioned to uphold those same hierarchies by perpetuating the fiction of white corporeal autonomy.

And this is where my project is so indebted to critical race scholarship, especially Black feminist theories of embodiment. I'm thinking in particular here of the influential work of Hortense Spillers, who insists that we disarticulate body from flesh and understand "the body" as a discursive, disciplining force of gendered antiblackness.[14] How might the premise of the non-identicality of body and flesh help us begin to discern the fissures and seams that the ostensible coherence of star dancing bodies conceals? Conversely, how might the labor practice of hiring dancers to perform in place of and then step aside for star bodies help us better discern the workings of corporeal ideologies? This is what I'm interested in exploring in my own research and why I see such value in working across disciplines. Done with care and critical rigor, such cross-disciplinary work can help us recognize and attempt to rectify the disciplinary biases that may have limited our thinking

Thank you.

Pamela: Next we have Brynn Shiovitz, who is a Lecturer in the Department of Dance at Chapman University. She is the editor of *The Body, the Dance, and the Text: Essays on Performance and the Margins of History* and the author of *Behind the Screen: Tap Dance, Race, and Invisibility During Hollywood's Golden Age*, which is coming out with Oxford UP later this year—and I'm very excited about it, personally.

Brynn: Thank you, Pam. I thought I would give a brief overview of this book which is coming out later this year and then offer a diagram that will hopefully illustrate what I'm saying because these ideas can be a bit dense to deliver and comprehend in five minutes.

Similar to Anthea, I am trying to think with and across dance, film, and critical race studies in our approaches to corporeality and like Hilary, I am researching dance and animation methods vis-à-vis technology. For me, it is precisely the overlapping of disciplines and methods which produce—and I like this phrase Anthea just used—our "unexamined assumptions" and biases—or perhaps even a kind of racial naivete around what we see.

Behind the Screen traces a history of blackface on screen and the covert means by which it entered Hollywood cinema, despite the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's decades-long efforts to censor such racial caricature and specifically visible blackface from appearing. While the book explores lots of different aspects of racial and ethnic representation during Hollywood's Golden Age, it foregrounds the idea that that the perception of racial difference lives in Hollywood's optics. This means that by considering sound and sonic practices on film such as tap dance and jazz soundtracks, we may be able to better understand such a mirage, both its why and its how.

Up until now, minstrel scholarship has assumed a certain visibility when speculating on the psychological, political, or economic intentions and ramifications of blackface performance. The theories which tend to hold the most weight all take sight for granted. With the exception of Susan Manning's work, which explains that minstrelsy can be metaphorical—that white dancers' bodies can become "vehicles for the tenors of nonwhite subjects"—and reference Otherness, rather than overtly engage in impersonation, most writing on the subject understands minstrelsy to be both literal and visible. In that way, minstrel scholarship is generally about the literal and the highly visible act of donning blackface. [15]

Through various filmic examples I explore what it would mean to define blackface minstrelsy as simultaneously visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, overt and covert. To that end, I propose a concept of covert minstrelsy, which, unlike conventional forms of minstrelsy, relies on several layers of disguise, working together simultaneously to create a spectacle. It is this process—of glamorizing and spectacularizing blackface performance which remains hidden by the various layers' very synchronicity.

Covert minstrelsy is a specific type of minstrel performance wherein simultaneous sense perception, narrative, technology, and biased apparatuses of power (for example, the Production Code) work together to reinforce pre-existing assumptions about corporeality, as well as to create new ethnic and racial stereotypes through distraction. The screen is unique in that it is governed by a different set of rules than live performance, including optical technology/choreography, sound technology, post-production editing, the archive, etc.



Al Jolson performs "Mammy" in *The Jazz Singer* (1927).



An animated pickaninny doll cites Jolson in *Santa's Workshop* (1932).



The U.S. Army performs the minstrel number "Mandy" during World War II in *This is the Army* (1943).

Using covert minstrelsy as its primary lens, this book makes three central arguments. First, that race performance and specifically blackface minstrelsy need not be visible in order to be effective. This does not mean that such racial masquerades are metaphorical or even imperceptible, but it's the consideration that our vision may not always be reliable. In the animated short film *Santa's Workshop* (1932), for example, a pickaninny doll goes through Santa's quality control and blurts out "Mammy" on one knee, arms outstretched with white gloves.

Since the doll "works"—and is funny in Santa's eyes—it receives an "OK" stamp; it is ready to be gifted for Christmas. The pickaninny's reference to the nineteenth century minstrel stage is neither metaphorical nor imperceptible, but the layers of meaning encoded in this animated moment are far too nuanced for a spectator to register on a conscious level in the moment. Santa's minstrel gloves, the pickaninny's allusion to Al Jolson's famous "Mammy" moment in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and even the Catholic Church's (by way of Santa) approval of such racial masquerade ("OK") are just a few of the ideas that spectators consume during these five seconds of screen time.

Second, that blackface performance has been a part of the U.S. narrative since the 1820s, and accordingly, the imagery in music and dance, which has been linked to the minstrel stage, might carry an element of nostalgia for Americans who were never directly hurt by its portrayals. Sometimes this nostalgia is confused with patriotism. Designed to boost morale during the War, Michael Curtiz adapted Irving Berlin's 1942 Broadway musical *This is the Army* for the screen. In it, Jerry Jones (George Murphy), a song and dance man, is drafted into the army for World War I and stages a revue called *Yip Yip Yaphank*. Twenty-five years later Jerry's son, Johnny (Ronald Reagan), stages another musical which includes Berlin's now-famous minstrel song "Mandy." The visible blackface is moved to the background as five men wearing burnt cork sing the opening notes of "Mandy" in front of a large banjo. In the foreground sit dozens of enlisted men, filling in for the minstrel chorus as part of their service to the country.

The book's third central argument is that Africanist aesthetics have pollinated U.S. entertainment in such a way as to mistake blackface performance for lived experience, and furthermore, write Black artists out of the equation in favor of white bodies who utilize Black sensibilities. "*Hi-Di-Ho* in Your Soul" from *The Singing Kid* (1936), showcases the white performer as the proprietor of an Africanist aesthetic, as if to assert that Black people would fawn over someone like Al Jolson's use of Black rhythmic sensibilities.





Al Jolson, dressed like the famous tap dancer Bill Robinson, narratively establishes himself as the "swingin'est man in town," while the white actress Wini Shaw, made-up with blackface, sings "Save Me Sister" in a gospel gown. High on a pedestal, she communicates with Cab Calloway and Jolson in the pit while a large ensemble of Black performers sing praises to her and Jolson.

In A Day at the Races (1937) Harpo Marx appears playing a tin flute in a Black quarter of town adjacent to the horse stables. Hearing "Gabriel's" sounds, a group of Black children encircle the white performer and sing a call-and-response version of "Who dat man?" The answer is Gabriel and as such, Harpo leads these Black children (and later teenagers and adults) on his path to salvation in the film. Author's collection



From left to right: Charlie Barnett, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, and Lionel Hampton in a publicity photo from the 1948 RKO Radio Pictures film *A Song is Born*.

In addition to looking at this phenomenon of white performers conflating Blackness with blackface, that is real lived experience with racial caricature grounded in the white imagination, I examine how less visible forms of blackface minstrelsy transition white audiences away from associating an Africanist aesthetic with visible Blackness, while at the same time removing Black visibility from the screen. This is especially apparent in jazz films of the 1930s and 1940s, as in *A Song is Born* (1948). White artists like Charlie Barnett, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman slowly began taking the place of talented Black jazz musicians in high-grossing Hollywood films, not because Black jazz artists had disappeared but because jazz music was perceived to be "safer" when played by white musicians. Films which placed Dorsey and Goodman alongside Louis Armstrong and Lionel Hampton helped to legitimize the white production of Africanist forms. This diagram (click here to see it) offers a visual of how these three premises come together through covert minstrelsy.

Covert minstrelsy is the central concept of this book and working on covert minstrelsy are four guises, namely, the sonic, the protean guise, the tribute guise and the citational guise. These arrows in the diagram that are orbiting around demonstrate that the citational can impact the sonic guise and the sonic can impact the protean, etc. The tribute guise is the one that can impact others but isn't necessarily impacted upon. So each of these would be less visible forms of blackface minstrelsy. For example, the sonic guise uses elements such as dialect, tone, intonation, sound editing, soundtracks, voiceovers and lyric revision to somehow mask a form of blackface, whether it be visible or audible. And this allows certain performances to skirt the Production Code because there was a lot of racial and sexual imagery which wouldn't have otherwise been permitted in Hollywood at this time had they been completely overt. But because they are made more covert through the sonic guise, they become invisible. Fred Astaire, for example, would never have been allowed to perform his famous "Puttin' on the Ritz" tap dance to Irving Berlin's original lyrics in Blue Skies (1946),[16] which is why he sings about the well-to-do on Park Avenue instead of Harlem's high browns and lulu-belles.[17]



Fred Astaire reprises Irving Berlin's song "Puttin on the Ritz" in the film *Blue Skies* (1946), dancing to different lyrics than did Harry Richman in the pre-Code film *Puttin'* on the Ritz (1930).





Examples of the Bill Robinson effect: a racialized caricature of Bill Robinson performing his famous Stair Dance in the animated film *Old Mill Pond* (1936), and another version in *You're an Education* (1938).

The citational guise is a quoting of blackness through blackface and or white consciousness through recycled footage, or phenomenons I call the Bill Robinson effect, the Gabriel Variation, or the minstrel show within a show. An example of the Gabriel Variation can be seen in "Goin' to Heaven on a Mule" from the film *Wonder Bar* (1934).[18] Al Jolson and "Emperor Jones" participate in Hollywood's conception of a Black heaven, one which is created and performed by a completely white creative team. This song, featuring a tap dance performed by Hal LeRoy in blackface, allows Hollywood to sidestep many of the rules surrounding racial representation while simultaneously pulling "hot" rhythms out of the depths of hell.



An example of the Gabriel Variation: Al Jolson (on left) beside a caricature of Emperor Jones in "Goin' to Heaven on a Mule" in *Wonder Bar* (1934). Photo Courtesy of Warner Bros./Photofest.



A cartoon example of the Gabriel Variation: From left to right, citations of Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, de Lawd, Jimmie Lunceford, and Fats Waller, all fashioned as angels in the animated film *Clean Pastures* (1937). These intermediaries between Black heaven and "hellish" Harlem mirror these particular artists' unique status as crossover figures in the jazz community and also typify the

role of the Gabriel variation in these films.





One example of the minstrel show within a show can be seen in *Swanee River* (1939), a film about the life of composer Stephen Foster. In this scene Al Jolson plays the role of Edwin P. Christy of the famous Christy Minstrels, a troupe of white blackface minstrels who frequently performed Foster's tunes. Because Christy always performed in blackface, his character *necessitated* the use of makeup, thereby excusing Jolson's performance in blackface even during a time when the Production Code was most enforced in Hollywood.

A use of the minstrel show within a show as a simple form of citation in the film *Toyland Broadcast* (1934).

A tribute guise is when someone performs a purported honorific to an exceptional artist, for example, somebody like Bill Robinson. With the tribute guise someone will announce that the upcoming performance is a "tribute" to Bill Robinson or some other notable person, and somehow the very announcement of this being an honor or tribute to that famous person obliterates the fact that the performer is wearing blackface makeup or doing very offensive caricatures.





Eleanor Powell performs in a tribute to Bill Robinson in *Honolulu* (1939) and Bill Robinson performs his famous stair dance in *Harlem is Heaven* (1932).

The protean guise is made up of quick costume or character changes. Eddie Cantor is a perfect example of somebody who goes through these mutations. Animation is another area where we see these quick changes which distract a viewer from registering all of the offenses on a conscious level precisely because they do happen so quickly. These include costume changes, disguises, drawing caricatures or anthropomorphism, as in when a human becomes an animal. The fact that they are an animal rather than a person makes it easier for the animators to say, "Hey, no, this is allowed because it's not a real person that we're making fun of. We're just making fun of the animals".





A pig caricature of Cab Calloway in *Porky* at the Crocadero (1938).

The real Cab Calloway performs in *Stormy Weather* (1943).

And this is just the basic framework for this concept of covert minstrelsy.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Pamela: Last but certainly not least, we have Sylvie Vitaglione, who holds a PhD in Cinema Studies from NYU and is currently an Adjunct Professor at the University of Toledo and a Research Associate at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Her research and publications have centered on site-specific screendance and she is currently at work on a project entitled "From Fonda to Fitbits: A History of Dance and Fitness Media."

Sylvie: Thank you, and thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here on screen with you. My contribution to today's roundtable is a side note from multiple previous projects and my current project, which Pamela mentioned. My main concern today is examining the labor politics of the shift to "working from home" — or for dancers "working on screen" — that dance artists in both established companies and those working as freelance artists, had to make due to the pandemic.

Most of my work prior to this COVID pandemic was concentrated on screendance in more avant-garde or experimental circles, so perhaps less commercial than some of the examples that we've considered so far. For most of the films and installations I explored previously there were always these crucial questions at the end, which were "Who pays for this dance? And do the makers get anything back? In other words, what makes this more than a passion project? Can we ever consider screendance a viable part of the profession of dance making?" I asked these questions quite bluntly to filmmakers and choreographers premiering their work at festivals, who were so excited to simply have it on a screen. For example, at the Lincoln Center in New York City, I would ask, "How much does this cost to make and how much do you take away?" For many of the makers, the projects were personal investments, entirely funded by themselves and with no hope of any form of income or even ticket sales. These were not seen as works of commercial interest and therefore they don't make money.

When the world shut down and dancers moved offstage and into their cramped living rooms, I found it of great interest to watch what they were producing and to address the question of who gets to work on screen and for money. These observations are provocations rather than definite answers because only select members of the dance community continued to receive their salary and to work on screen without the risk of unemployment. In fact, for many dancers, this was a great opportunity for them to take time off to heal their injuries or to go have babies or to work with dancers across geographic borders, which can lead to some really interesting screen work. Notably, multiple videos from ballet companies merged different dancers from different companies, and this created a really interesting "corporeality," to borrow a term that we have used in dance studies.

My primary premise is to first ask about literal places to work during the pandemic. What screens did these bodies gravitate towards as a place to train and also as a place to perform? For most dancers the answer would be a laptop screen, with which they could continue to rehearse or train with their fellow dancers and employers. In terms of performing, does YouTube become a quick platform for people to post their work and share? Notably, TikTok has been a new way to reorient our screen and conceptualize choreography that can fit in a very narrow format. Instagram has also been useful for many dancers to post short excerpts of their choreography, and Vimeo continues to provide a high-quality platform—sometimes password protected—for choreographers and dancers to share their









Screenshots from four of New York City Ballet's 2020 "New Works Festival" short films: Russell Janzen in "Solo for Russell: Sites 1-5," choreographed by Pam Tanowitz and Russell Janzen; Ghaleb Kayali, Emily Kikta, Mira Nadon, and Peter Walker in "pixelation in a wave (Within Wires)," choreographed by Sidra Bell; Unity Phelan in "new song," choreographed by Andrea Miller; and Victor Abreu in "Water Rite," choreographed by Jamar Roberts. All films were directed by Ezra Hurwitz.

reels, excerpts or works in their entirety. Out of all of these platforms that seemed like default choices, I kept wondering, "When you put your work in these places, what kind of money could you possibly generate?" Digging online in searches such as "How to make money online as a dancer?" advice coming from places such as *Dance Magazine* was shocking to me, but at the same time, useful. For example, many writing in suggest starting a channel and selling a product through videos or creating videos using AdSense on YouTube, which would then mean that if any viewer clicked the ad links while watching the video the creator would receive a small amount of money.

But in order to actually make money on any of these platforms, especially on YouTube, TikTok or Instagram, you would need thousands of views. And this is where I became really interested in the shift from Uptown or Downtown dance to YouTube. The audience changes, the expectations change, people don't pay for content on YouTube. Why would they suddenly donate \$40 to watch something that they can scrub through or watch even just a portion of for free? There's such freedom of choice with screens that we don't have when we're in the environment of the stage that my inquiry really led me to wonder just how much of an alternative space for theatrical work this was. As an example, New York City Ballet took one of its seasons that was set for the stage, including new work and commissions, and decided to use their resources and talent to make a series of short films instead. Most of these six films are shot around Lincoln Center, and were posted on YouTube as a fundraiser. While if on stage I imagine this program would generate significant ticket sales, on YouTube the fundraising initiative gathered just under \$3,000. Consider how much investment there was in making these films, paying the choreographers and dancers in the rehearsal process, and then see that that fundraiser initiative fail—because clearly companies like New York City Ballet expect many more zeros than that. It gives me pause because if this happens to the people with the resources, what of the freelancer? What is available in terms of work on screen?

There are other ways to make money by using screens, but the structure is not necessarily set up, so it does require some training. Not all dancers are cinematographers, not all choreographers have access to cameras and lighting equipment, for example. And not all dancers are necessarily good at performing on concrete with the sounds of traffic around them, so it requires a lot of flexibility and adaptation for these bodies to continue to work. I've also been looking into what different companies have done in order to keep their dancers employed. Larger companies offered reduced contracts and furloughs. But for most people, side gigs became the major form of income during this period. For those who worked in the service industry, including restaurants, cafes, and bars in New York City, this posed a major problem when those venues were all closed at once.

Dance films—and not Screendance because that's still a little bit vague to the general public—but dance films popped up not as substitutes for entire works, but as appetizers for perhaps a full evening-length piece that might one day appear on the stage. The screen here offered an alternative but not an exact equivalent. It was just a means to an end. It was a temporary measure for many, although now with the investment in equipment and the realization that screendance can provide more accessibility and even widen the audience for some of the work, it has perhaps become a more permanent enterprise. To give you some more numbers and examples before I conclude here—I was looking at the series called "Works in Process" at the Guggenheim museum which typically invited different choreographers to work in the special space of the Guggenheim. This series turned instead into a pandemic bubble where choreographers could safely live and work together and produce work in the form of a video. Originally, when the project began, the goal was to generate five-minute videos to be posted on the museum's YouTube channel. Now, a five-minute video could take months to









Screenshots from one of the Guggenheim's "Notes from the Bubble" videos, featuring dancers from Ephrat Asherie Dance, Les Ballet Afrik, and The Missing Element at their 2020 Works & Process "bubble residencies" in the Hudson Valley, NY. Cinematography and editing by Dancing Camera, Nic Petry and Julie Rooney.

produce or it could take a weekend; but the prize at the end was \$500. In New York City that's money that won't get you very far. After imagining paying two or three dancers, you would not have the money to pay the editor to finish your film.

There were multiple other forms of funding available, mainly for emergency services such as to dancers who did file for unemployment. Dance NYC provided a COVID impact study and suggested that about 46% of New York City dancers who replied to a survey in 2020 were unemployed. 46% is enormous, and most of them needed money for their rent and food, in other words basic needs. When possible, a few grants were available to work on screen. A longstanding grant that the Dance Film Association has awarded comes in batches of \$500. That can only get you so far if you are working to pay your New York City rent; you would also hope to pay your dancers and crew.

There has also been a push to shorten content in order to make it more screen-ready, and so evening-length pieces become too expensive or simply unsuitable to these platforms where we are used to consuming things in minutes and hours. There have also been initiatives to see if there are ways to generate income, such as paywalls or password-protected content, offering discounts for online shows whether live or pre-recorded, or adding a time limit to specific recordings so that the work is exclusively available for a month, for example.

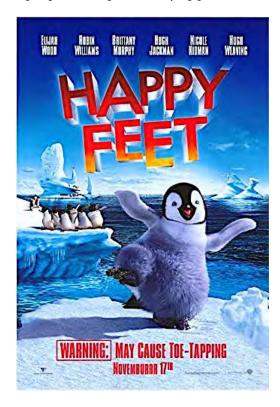
Finally, I would like to share a quote from a *Dance Magazine* advice piece by Chava Pearl Lansky:

"But when it comes to curating your digital dance footprint, finding the sweet spot between too much and too little can yield a huge payoff, allowing for all kinds of opportunities." [19] [open endnotes in new window]

I hear in this so much optimism for all the things you could do with your screens and all the ways you can share your choreography and your movement online. But I return to the very premise that Screendance has been around for so many years, and yet there is no structure or infrastructure there to financially support the makers. There is nothing—and we're measuring in batches of \$500. It is still not a sustainable practice for many makers. It is a side gig. It is a passion project. It is a fun two-minute video to post on Instagram, but it's still not a fully formed art practice that has the support it deserves.

Pamela: Alright, so as we head into our discussion with the audience, here is a sort of opening provocation: What I'm hearing from all of you is about a *destabilization of the body*—whether it's about the erasure of labor and the inability to survive, whether it's about the erasure of identities (and the ways that white supremacy tends to replace any difference with itself), or whether it's about commodification. So I'm wondering if we can talk about this question of destabilization, especially because in my perhaps more optimistic opening remarks, I talked about how screens can make bodies do impossible things and allow them to do *more*. But what I'm hearing from all of your opening remarks is that in some cases, the screen allows the body to do *less*. It *prevents* so much and *replaces* so much. So that's my opening salvo to spark further discussion.

Hilary: I think this feeling of destabilization we're all speaking about is related to the often-invisible labor of dance, and especially to the common phenomenon where dancers are not credited for their work. I'm thinking of Pam's research on the *Fortnite* dances here, and Anthea's work on copyright and dance. Coming up through dance school, I often heard the phrase: "dancers make good workers." There's an idea that dancers are *already* expected to do impossible things and to work tirelessly in a machinic drive toward perfection—a drive that preps them well to be workers in any realm. Because dance is geared towards spectacle (as



The movie poster for *Happy Feet* (Warner Bros, 2006) directed by George Miller, which credits the voice actors but not Savion Glover, who provided movement for Mumble's tap dance scenes.



Savion Glover tap dancing next to Mumble the Penguin.

Colleen pointed out), we could think of the virtuosic as a medium, as a kind of wish or aspiration for the body that is baked into dance. The virtuosic labor of dance sometimes seems to belong to the dance itself, not to the dancer's body that worked hard to produce it. This is true for a lot of rotoscoped characters where the motion is provided by dancers who were never credited in the final product. The 2006 film *Happy Feet*, for example, stars a young CGI penguin named Mumble, who is voiced by actor Elijah Wood, but whose body movements and dance scenes are animated via Mocap by American tap dancer Savion Glover.

The poster for *Happy Feet* demonstrates the hierarchy of contributors to the project: while Elijah Wood's name appears at the top of the poster, Savion Glover's is nowhere to be found. Neither is he acknowledged in the opening credits or the trailers for the film. Glover is widely regarded as the best American tap dancer of his generation and he supplies a key component—some may even say the most important component—of Mumble's identity; after all, this is a story about a Penguin who finds his identity through dance. Yet his labor is erased. Likewise, as I mentioned earlier, the dancer who provided motion for Disney's *Snow White* was a 14-year-old girl who agreed to dance the character, knowing that Disney wouldn't compensate and wouldn't credit her because they didn't want to confuse audiences about who the "star" of the film was. So the idea of the star power of the individual dancer collides with the intersubjective, virtuosic quality of dance (as something that can exist outside of the individual dancing body).

Pamela: I think the question of credit is an important one that *is* in many ways circling—or the specter floating above—so much of our work. The question is about credit where due, and how often that credit itself can be disaggregated from not only the bodies themselves, but also from the histories that stand behind so many of these works, whether famous or not. And it requires a certain kind of excavation on the part of either the viewer or the historians to find the source and attribute that credit where due.

Anthea: I am very much interested in destabilizing some of my own notions of the body via these questions of credit and labor. I'm also cognizant of a tension within my own thinking: my call for attention to labor is a call for attending to the materiality of bodies, and yet I'm uneasy with what ideas of the body are grounding our notions of material labor. I want to insist that we pay attention to labor practices, but I also want to insist that those practices are themselves products of discourse and ideology. To riff on Hilary's discussion, the grain of the body is itself a site of mediation, right? It's not outside of discourse or ideology. Part of what's so interesting and complicated about bodies is that, at least in the case of dance, they function as the means of production, and yet they also often (always?) seem to *conceal* their own means of production. And so I'm thinking



Savion Glover in mocap suit (right) and Mumble the Penguin (left).

about what it means to call for serious and sustained attention to the materiality of bodies *and* to complicate what it is we're calling for at the same time.

In thinking about our papers together, I also feel compelled to raise another question: When we say "dance," are we invoking the same thing that we're invoking when we say "body"? Is "dance" a way of crystallizing our ideas about the body, or is "dance" something separate from the body? I'm wondering if our papers and comments are using these terms interchangeably or in different ways.

Sylvie: I wanted to pick up on some of the things that we're throwing out there. I wrote down something that recurred in most of our comments: that tension between visibility and invisibility of labor. But I'm also really curious about whether the screen—be it commercial, large scale, or small scale—demands a certain construction, reconstruction, or production of a body for the dance. Because as I see some examples of animation, for example, I am in awe, I am awestruck because I think, "Wow, how can they do that? Wow!" There's something about the process that is obscured but is so riveting. I'm just watching and wondering "how did they do this?" And yet it's a dancing body that I'm not seeing, plus extra technology that is producing this performance and the emotional reaction I have to it. So there's a part of me that even thinks about this when I see Madonna in her music video "Vogue". Does the screen somehow demand more than the stage? I think it's really up for debate, but there's a way in which there's one body, and that's not enough in a lot of these examples. We need to add to it or take away from it or hide some part of it, or just build onto it. There's a sense in which we can't just let it exist. And certainly particular bodies, rather than others, are allowed to exist. Even though none of them are unembellished, there's always a sense of needing to put more onto the screen specifically.

Pamela: I want to suggest that this is where we have to pull Brynn's many questions in: Does it always have to be visible? Because we default to the assumption that all that we need to know is visible, that there is this singular body that we can somehow find underneath all the layers of technology. And there isn't, at the end of the day. So where does the sonic—or other invisible aspects—intervene? And I think that while Brynn focuses on tap dance, we could even think more broadly about the sounds of footfalls in screendance in general because microphones make that possible. It doesn't have to be a dance that is intended to be sonic in order to be sonic, right? So how does that fit into the questions that we're asking?

Brynn: I think with Anthea trying to problematize this idea that even labor itself is constructed (if I'm understanding it correctly) and then to bring in this idea of visibility, I would say what happens if we're shown one thing so that we believe that labor looks a certain way (so it's like false advertising that labor looks one way) and that actually the people constructing what that labor looks like...are already mediated as well? I'm thinking about animation and dancers. One person I look a lot at is Bill Robinson and animations of his body and how if you animate

him to look like a frog or toad or a monkey or anything like that, there are certain exaggerations that occur. So, because these figments of the imagination—that is these animals—are supposed to stand in for Bill Robinson's body, a passive consumer assumes that it must be Bill Robinson's labor behind the image or character—caricature; but generally these are people who don't actually know how to tap dance who then get dubbed in to perform the expert. So then what a spectator sees is really just a poor copy of Bill Robinson's labor. So then it's maybe misattributed labor? And that can actually be more dangerous than giving credit where the labor is due, I think.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Boston Dynamics' Robots "Spot" and "Atlas" in performance. Still from YouTube video: "Do You Love Me?" Uploaded by Boston Dynamics, Dec. 29, 2020.



Five Boston Dynamics Spot models dance in formation. Stills from "Spot's On It," a performance video posted to YouTube in June 2021

Hilary: To add to our conversation on the sonic qualities of dance, I've been writing about the <u>recent promotional videos</u> of dancing robots that were released by Boston Dynamics. These are robots that are generally non-anthropocentric warehouse machinery meant to lift palettes, and they're also military weapons that are currently being trained in the field for reconnaissance missions and whatnot. And they've been choreographed into this very *humanistic* dance set to the song "Do You Love Me?" by The Contours, which is, of course, an all-Black male group.

A lot of Black social dance moves are used in the choreography of this video, but it's a video meant to show the incredible potential of these (de-racialized, degendered) robots. Dance is also being used as a kind of spectacle again to make us forget that these are also potentially killing machines. There are a lot of layers here that we don't have time to explore in depth, but I think this example speaks to the fact that it's not just a question of whether there's a *real* referent body there or even a *real dancer* doing the labor of dance. There's still something going on here—a composite body, a process of appropriation or a subtle yet harmful play of signifiers—that only dance makes possible.

Anthea: Hilary, this example and your comments are really helpful in getting at something that I was struggling to articulate earlier, which is this: What feels so vitally important about screendance to me is that the mediatedness of screendancing bodies, which we are so accustomed to confronting, can teach us about the mediatedness of all bodies, even those "off camera" bodies that we are much more inclined to think of as referent, unmediated bodies. Looking at those robots, I want to immediately ask where the unseen humans are.

And one of the most enjoyable aspects of this research for me has been finding ways to ask and answer that question of non-robots. I love sitting with images that reveal what's "Behind the Screen," to cite the title of Brynn's book. Such images let you see, all at once, where the camera is, which body or bodies ended up on screen, and all of the other bodies that it took to create that image. And this multiplicity, this combination of the "seen" and the "unseen," that goes into the production of screen bodies is what I'm coming to believe applies to all bodies. Each of our bodies is also constructed by a host of bodies that we don't regularly see. This may be more geared toward a dance studies than a film studies audience, but this is why I think dance studies scholars need to be paying attention to screendance, and what I've found so useful about working across disciplines.

Colleen: I'm thinking about how the robots basically demonstrate what I'm investigating in relation to feminism, but with the robots, we're so awed by watching robots dance, do we start to lose all the things that everyone's unpacking about what goes into making that possible—the labor that goes into it, the references to Black expressive culture (these vernacular dance forms)? Does the robot spectacle alleviate the need to actually think about what we're seeing? Even though, at the same time, I know that spectacle often serves as a kind of empowerment for people. So, as we consume, we're able to identify with it in particular ways that feels empowering, even though what we are watching might ultimately have a negative structural effect, or no structural effect. I'm interested in this because I'm often thinking about—and am really driven by—my own relationship to the spectacle of femininity and how it feels alienating to me at times, but then when I talk to my students about it, sometimes it's empowering



Cover for The Contours' 1962 Motown LP "Do You Love Me?" released with the label Waxtime.



Boston Dynamics' "Spot" model, in training for reconnaissance missions with the French army. Image from École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan, The Verge.



for them, so how I view spectacle depends on what perspective I'm coming from and through which feminist lens I am viewing. And if one looks historically at burlesque, what we see in contemporary media today feels like a recycling of what has existed before, it just gets more spectacular in a sense.

Pamela: This is a good moment for our audience to start to weigh in, especially because part of what we're trying to tease out is what the Society for Cinema and Media Studies can take, and what film and media studies can take from this discussion. Even if your work isn't in dance, but you look at other aspects of the moving image and presumably bodies (although not everyone does) what can you gain from all this? I think this is a great moment to bring everyone else in. I'll start with a question from Jenny Oyallon-Koloski (in the chat), who unfortunately had to leave but I think it's a helpful one.

So, thinking through what we've all been saying about labor and credit and attending to the multiplicity of bodies behind every body, if you will, the question is about copyrighting dance—which Anthea has a whole book about, but it continues to come up[20][open endotes in new window]—and one of the references is to my own (unpublished) work around Fortnite. I've tracked how the public discourse around Fortnite dances [20a] is anchored by a slew of copyright lawsuits that may or may not have any success because of everything documented in Anthea's book, which demonstrates that dance is actually incredibly difficult to copyright! So, the question is: "I was wondering if/how the potential copyrighting or licensing movement ties in with any of these questions or your projects. It strikes me that this potentially connects to questions of labor: the ability of dancers and choreographers to generate ongoing financial stability through licensing (to connect to Sylvie's questions) raises questions about ownership and appropriation (which is also what we're talking about) and connects to questions of dance documentation and how to create a standard way to record the material that would be 'readable' to non-dancers."

Sylvie: I wanted to jump in here with regard to posting choreography online. I was reading a series of articles that are, again, advice for choreographers and dancers, a bit of guidance regarding protocols for putting work up for free. The overall advice, a lot of times coming from agents, has been to share some portion of it, obviously to give yourself full credit and make sure everything is labeled, but the words that are used are interesting to me: "sharing" choreography, which again is for free, and then invitations to "copy or collaborate" so this is really relevant mostly to TikTok. The lineage of challenging one to replicate those moves is sort of an invitation to deliberately steal and borrow and replicate the movement. For me, it raises so many questions regarding authorship and, of course, coming back to that notion of credit: if you're going to put it out there for free, then it can be deliberately stolen, or perhaps you *want* it to be. So it's really interesting to see the ways that different media technologies *invite* that form of theft.





YouTube user Nixinova offers a side-by-side comparison of Donald Faison's improvised dance to Bell Biv DeVoe's song "Poison" (as the character Turk in the television show *Scrubs*) and a *Fortnite* avatar doing the game's default "emote" dance, called "Dance Moves." The <u>video</u> has garnered over 1.8 million views since October 1, 2018.



Chancelor Bennett (Chance the Rapper)'s viral July 13, 2018 tweet criticizing Fortnite for profiting off the dances made by Black creators without crediting or remunerating them.



Anthea: I'm not sure I have anything new to say about copyright, but I continue to see debates about ownership and copyright in dance as symptoms of a crisis about the reproduction and reproducibility of dance: both an acknowledgment that dance is always already circulating and an attempt to control that circulation. The recent spate of attempts to copyright choreography does seem to reflect a shift that is directly related to what Sylvie was just referring to, which is dances that are designed to be reproduced en masse, as opposed to concert dances where there's still an investment in dance's reproduction remaining under the control of a single author "genius" figure (or estate). At the same time, some of these more recent efforts to secure copyright protection for choreography seem very much to be attempts to push back against the entrenched equation of whiteness and property rights.[21] As exciting as it is to see all these new efforts to copyright dance, I'm interested in pushing my ideas in different directions. Part of what gave rise to my interest in dance-ins was an interest in thinking about the reproduction of corporeality from the perspective of the "copies" rather than from that of the ostensible authors.

micha cárdenas: Hi, thanks so much. I'm micha, I'm an artist that works with dance and a media studies scholar. I've also never seen a panel about dance at SCMS—this was thrilling, a brilliant panel; so many amazing ideas! I was really interested in Anthea's question about what is the relationship between dance and the body, or what is dance without the body, and it seems like Brynn and Hilary both mentioned something that is kind of in dialogue with each other, like the animation of people as animals as an excuse to say "it's not racist," and then the 3D animation in the amazing Major Lazer video, and ways that I feel like often 3D or CGI characters are just used as a way to elide questions of race. I wonder if anybody wants to say more about that? Thanks!

Pamela: I think that is at the core of my interest in new media: the ways in which media texts and their marketing continually find excuses to elide the question of race. Certainly in the discourses around Fortnite and those lawsuits about the dances that have been stolen to make the Fortnite emotes (purchasable expressions of emotion), participants are very much devoted to not only giving credit (and financial remuneration) where due, but also to recovering those movements as belonging to Black expressive culture. Black vernacular dances are at the core and the backbone of all U.S. vernacular dance at this point. And the processes of stripping those dances of the particularity of their origins are ongoing, and that they occur across media. I think what screens do in this context is make it a more permanent stripping. Because once it's recorded, it's there, and the act of recording, especially by a major studio or media corporation, makes it the version that circulates. So rather than dances that occur in a community space in real time that are ephemeral, these are dances that are planned, recorded, circulated, and re-watched and become the dances. And those are nearly always bound up with power structures that are white supremacist. So I think that is at the core of a lot of our work here: making sense of that and also finding ways to undo, push back, re-balance, do something with that fact.

Brynn: I can say something. I can actually say about twelve things, but feel free to interrupt at any point. I just have one example that keeps coming to mind, and it's not related to animals directly, but it's related to the camera—or, not even the camera, but structures behind the camera that have so much power. I'm thinking of the animated short that came out in 1935 called "Little Black Sambo," and it was originally done in color, and the NAACP had a really hard time with it, obviously, and vocalized that concern, so the animators behind it (and the





Screenshots from the music video for "Light it Up" by Major Lazer, produced by Method Studios (2016) depicting dancing avatars most likely animated by Mocap. These figures are variously prostrate and disintegrating.

producers) changed it to black and white. And the argument was, "Well, they're not being depicted as any particular race because this film is in black and white," so that was enough to allow it to be distributed. And relatedly, to get back to the question of animals and how certain racist structures operate through animals, it was the same idea: if we make a Black character into an animal, nobody can complain that we are saying anything racist about this particular animal. And there were some figures who were constantly depicted as animals, and there were some figures who were constantly depicted as humanimals, so part human and part animal, and the problem becomes this: there were messages being sent based on whether a person was being portrayed as an animal, or halfway between the two, or a caricature of a human. So we look at this process itself, of what animal that person became—or still today, who the voice is, what the animal looks like, and how those justify the representation of certain bodies.

Hilary: That's great. I will jump in, too. I'm thinking about the clip I showed of Cab Calloway's rotoscoped ghost, which is actually a version of a walrus character that was rotoscoped by the same animator. These clips often begin with a video of a live performance by Calloway, where he's with his band, and then you sort of see his body morph into the animation. And it strikes me that there's obviously racism happening in both mine and Brynn's examples, and this racism is bound up with ideas of racial essentialism, but there's something about the way that the motion data is used to animate characters like Calloway's ghost or walrus that is not necessarily *caricature*, but is in fact almost the opposite of caricature because it doesn't rely on exaggeration so much as a sense of internal truth or authentication? Mocap can be used to facilitate a kind of...digital blackface, I suppose, that infuses animated characters with extracted gesture, while at the same time enforcing a post-racial fantasy of hybridity and transformation.

But, also speaking to what micha brought up about the Major Lazer video, I find that video really interesting because the figures are splitting apart in really violent ways, and they're kind of falling to the ground, melting...there's a lot of death or destruction in that video, but it's a joyful kind of destruction...and I don't really know what to make of it, especially because Method Studios has been very secretive about how they animated that video. So to me, it's clear that some mocap was used—I think it must have been—but (and this is often the case) no dancers' names have been credited, and Method Studios hasn't been clear about how much is mo-cap and how much is digital animation. As animation gets more and more verisimilar or realistic, there seems to be a greater capacity for violence related to the body...and I'm struck by the fact that so many of these examples draw us back to violence: the plasticity of animation, and the dispossession, erasure and even destruction of bodies that extractive animation methods foster. Dance seems to play an important role in this tendency.

Annie Sullivan: First of all, I want to say thank you to everyone, for one, having a very cohesive panel, but also for staying under five minutes and allowing time for conversation *between* each other very politely, which doesn't always happen at roundtables. I am not an expert on dance, but I loved hearing all the different conversations about race, gender, and this issue of labor in dance. And I was also then wondering—so I apologize if this is a novice question—but it's precisely about this question of class and amateur dancers, and how that factors into how we understand dance. Because we saw these images of ball culture that got taken away from them (Black queer and trans dancers) and co-opted by Madonna, who has a professional choreographer and dance training, and I wonder how we think about the role of the amateur, or class dynamics, in not only Black but also Latinx or Indigenous dance communities who don't have the same sort of access to professionalization and resources as the dancers who get integrated into film and

Screen/dance in the	United States	engaging the	moving bodi	ac in	moving pictures	n /
Screen/dance in the	United States:	engaging the	moving boai	es m	moving pictures.	, p. 4

other media texts.

Sylvie: I want to jump in with an example of how this also seems like another blind spot in relation to how we are looking at screendance: the question of class. In multiple videos that I've been viewing recently, where dancers are performing from their homes, and they're doing these compilation videos where they're all performing together from their different living rooms, kitchen, bathrooms and what-have-you., there's been such extra information divulged by seeing where they live and what they wear and who they're working with or whether they have three dogs, or a chandelier in their living room. It has exposed different socioeconomic backgrounds, different domestic spaces and social responsibilities. There was such a difference in hierarchy apparent when I saw these ballet dancers, and I thought, "Wow, look at her shiny coffee table. She's a principal." And then you look at the corps de ballet member who's performing in their bedroom with bunk beds, and you're thinking, "Okay, yeah, it's New York City, just trying to make a living..." So there was such a discrepancy between the performers based on their mise-en-scène that really revealed an element of class that you would never see on stage, because dancers are sculpted and designed to be whatever they're supposed to be on stage.



Jeanne Coyne (far left), Debbie Reynolds (center), and fellow chorus dancers in the "All I Do Is Dream of You" number from *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Coyne served as Reynolds's dancein on the film and, together with Carol Haney, helped train the inexperienced Reynolds in the months leading up to the film shoot.



Two dancers show off their moves during a 1976 episode of *Soul Train*.

Anthea: I have a slightly different take on the question, which I don't think is exactly what you were asking, but at least in the examples I'm looking at for my project, I'm trying to flip who we consider to be the "amateur" and who we consider to be the "professional." In several cases that I'm looking at, the stars were the dance novices and were rigorously trained by their much more experienced and much more talented but uncredited dance-ins. And so, class status and professional/amateur status don't actually align how we might otherwise think. Dance-ins were very underpaid compared to stars, as well as compared to dance directors and assistant dance directors.

Colleen, I am wondering if your book looks at any amateur dances in advertisements.

Colleen: There are things that I look at in ads that are *designed* to look like amateurs. Like the Bacardi ad, "No Bad Dancing," which is designed to look like a home video of someone walking around filming people who just can't dance, but they're drunk so they're doing it anyway. In writing about the ad, I didn't take the time to try to figure out if they actually could or couldn't dance...I was more interested in talking about the perception and how the ad is trying to create this idea that it is a home video, that it is something that is accessible, that they're everyday people. So, I was linking it to things like reality television, the way we construct people as being "like us" in a way, as a way of access.

And I think Anthea's making a great point about how often the *invisible* bodies are the bodies that are the professionals, and what we see is not that, actually. I was trying to think of a specific example, but I'm not coming up with one at this moment...though I would argue that in "Vogue" Madonna is less a professional than the people with whom she's dancing. When we think about dance, that was not really her emphasis; whereas Beyoncé might be considered to be in a different category as far as dance and choreography goes.

Pamela: So I'm at an advantage—I know Annie and her work pretty well, and we somehow haven't quite talked about this in the way that I want to talk about it, so that's why I want to bring it up. Most of what I look at is actually vernacular dance that, as some of you have just been talking about, has been made into a professional dance (where we take something that's generally unchoreographed and just happens, and we choreograph it), but I think one of the big issues here that we actually haven't talked about is medium specificity. So, film constructs dance as choreographed and prepared and planned and professional, but television has often constructed dance as a thing that we all do, whether realityadjacent or not. And I know that Annie actually works on a lot of local Blackproduced TV, and I think that is in fact a good example of a space where vernacular dance is sometimes allowed to just happen, unchoreographed. On a larger scale, Soul Train is a really great example of vernacular dance being made available to the masses, and I know many folks whose family tradition was to simply turn on Soul Train as a family activity or bonding experience. I also look at TV variety shows, and they're constructed to seem less rehearsed than they are, so I think television is perhaps a space where the less professional, or the seemingly unprofessional can happen—American Bandstand is another well-known example. So, the seriality of it and the live aspect allow for the happenstance dance rather than the carefully prepared and choreographed dance that I think film seems to demand much of the time.

Colleen: Anthea mentioned TikTok, too, in the chat [regarding vernacular dance on screen]. So this is my question [for Anthea]: You're asking about dance without bodies, in the sense of a referent. I've been trying to think about what that would mean in different ways, and this might go too much towards a kind of abstraction



Ernest Evans (Chubby Checker) and a group of young people dance on a 1961 episode of the variety program *The Ed Sullivan Show* while Checker sings "Let's Twist Again."

that continues to invisibilize, but it was making me think about affect and relationality and flow and patterns. So, thinking about what dance would be if we're not thinking about the body, but rather thinking about the ways in which it activates different kinds of things, so that dance is a heightened sense of flow or a heightened sense of patterns and relationships. And I'm just wondering what you think about that, because I'm trying to sort of dig into this notion a little bit more.

Anthea: That was a really big question for me in the copyright work, because copyright is premised on the idea that you can separate the dance from the dancer. I was trying to think through what Hilary was saying and trying to ask myself what looking at *dancing* bodies gets us that looking at bodies, just bodies, doesn't. I don't have an answer to that, but I heard in Hilary's comments a suggestion that there is something particular to *dance* that's potentially distinct from what's particular to *bodies*. I've been adamant that we dance scholars have a lot to say about bodies and that anyone working on bodies should pay closer attention to dance scholarship. But I'm now unsure about when I'm using the terms "dancing body" and "body" interchangeably. That's not really an answer to your question, Colleen; it's just where my thinking is right now.

Brynn: So I'm thinking about what Colleen just said and what Anthea just said. It made me think about how a lot of us talk about, maybe an Africanist aesthetic, and that actually is distinct from bodies. So there is a rhythmic sensibility...so we can talk about sound without bodies, and we can talk about different rhythmic sensibilities or qualities of movement without actually talking about bodies themselves.

Hilary: I guess this is what interests me so much about motion capture. Because it actually is data that is drawn from a particular body—a singular body, often. One body, in a black cube, with sensors on it. Even as dance data is used to animate this material, and also idealistic, fantasy of the multiple body, of the dispersed dance, of the plasticity of dance, there is still this referent body-even if that "body" (or soul!) has been effectively turned into a string of numbers. And of course, when I am referring to Roland Barthes' concept of "the grain of the voice," I am doing so with my tongue in my cheek a little bit; I'm trying to complicate a particular idea that I believe haunts dance: We (in the West, especially), tend to think of dance as a "channel to the soul." We still understand dance as this expression of inner emotion, or something ineffable and unique to the individual's experience. This tendency stands in particular contrast with the historical instrumentalization of choreography and repeated, technical gesture as it relates to work science, Taylorism, capitalism, commercial spectacle, etc. And I'm very interested in how dance (as practice and field of study) is at tension between these two poles, and how motion capture and extractive animation methods reveal and complicate this tension.

Pamela: I will add one more little piece onto what you all just said. Colleen, your question reminded me of what I teach my students in what is currently a screendance unit of a larger course, but what will become a full screendance course next year. One of the things that I do with my students, who are non-dancers, all, is: I take that clip from *American Beauty* that has the plastic bag dancing in the wind, and I ask them to tell me: "Is this dance? How is this dance? How is the screen intervening to create dance?" And they often say, "Well it's forcing us to focus on a movement, and it's adding music to that movement such that we then interpret it as dance because we're so used to music accompanied by movement being dance." And because we have to look at this little bag, we see it





Two characters in *American Beauty* (1999) watch home video footage of a plastic bag "dancing" in the wind; the camera slowly zooms in on the television screen before cutting to a close-up of the footage that fills the frame. The scene is accompanied by a sparse musical composition consisting of piano and strings.

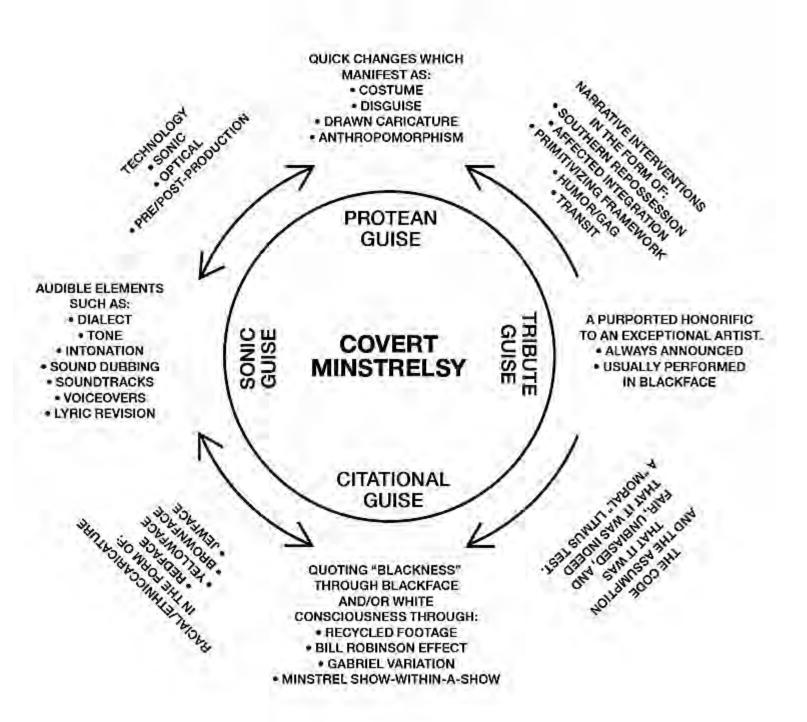
as the subject. So perhaps that is dance without a body, I don't know, but I'm interested in how screens can make that kind of intervention, can try and turn something into dance that we might not otherwise associate with dance or understand as dance.

But regarding the other side of the question, which is what does a dancing body do that a body doesn't, or what do we get out of a dancing body that we don't get out of just a body?, my answer to that was actually buried in my introduction, which is: After years of attending SCMS and looking for any little bit of dance anywhere in the program, I've been at a lot of panels with very smart papers about gesture. And I think the tipping point between gesture and dance is where I want to locate the importance of what we all do. Which is why screen studies scholars should pay attention to dance studies, because we talk about bodies so much. But I think that tipping point between gesture and dance, the increased potential for communication beyond that tipping point, is what we get from a dancing body specifically. There is an expression not necessarily of one's "soul"—all the musicals scholarship talks about how dance numbers in musicals express a lot of things that are actually pretty narrative-based and not about souls; they're about narrative structure or character change or conflict—but there is a well of expressivity and meaning that needs to be mined. Dance is like gesture on steroids. That's what we, I think, have to contribute to discussions of screens and what I hope our guests really take from us. This sort of richness of expression and meaning and labor and alienation, and all of this other stuff that can be harder to read from just "regular" bodies. It's already in the body, but it's more clear through dance, perhaps?

Sylvie: Oh, you just kind of caught the element that I wanted to expose here. That when we return to the screendance element of the performances that we're talking about, screendance is really exciting and provocative because of the ways that it can do away with the human body, whether we are now focusing on a plastic bag flying through the air or the motion of water in a stream or maybe we animate an object through stop-motion—we can completely create motion and movement and choreograph something that is audiovisual without a human referent. So there are ways in which it really destabilizes dance, but it also really destabilizes film because it can do away with narrative, it can do away with language, it can mess with sound. There's a way in which it is this even more experimental form of artistic expression; it can exist as a 2-minute short or a 90-minute installation, it really is so interdisciplinary that it can be provocative, frustrating, and also incredibly productive! For free, of course, because no one is going to buy that—but there are ways in which being at that interstice between dance and film allows for so much potential disruption and creation, which is I think one reason why in our panel and conference history there's not always a place to talk about this kind of work, because it doesn't fit with other practices of the moving image at the moment.

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Notes

- 1. Douglas, Rosenberg, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2016). [return to page 1]
- 1a. Panpan Yang, "Rotoscoping Body: Secret Dancers, Animated Realism and Temporal Critique," *Spectator*, 36.1 (2016): 33–42.
- 2. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (Hill & Wang, 1978), 188.
- 3. Deborah Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image* (Zero Books, 2018), 128.
- 4. Deborah Levitt, "Animation and the Medium of Life: Media Ethology, An-Ontology, Ethics," *Inflexions* 7, "Animating Biophilosophy" (March 2014),130.
- 5. Spyros Papapetros, "Movements of the Soul: Traversing Animism, Fetishism, and the Uncanny," *Discourse* 34:2-3 (Spring/Fall 2012), 188.
- 6. Colleen Dunagan, *Consuming Dance: Choreography and Advertising* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 7. Madison Moore, "'I'm that bitch': on Queerness and the Catwalk," *The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 18:2 (2017), 147.
- 8. See, for example, Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (Oxford University Press, 2012); and Addie Tsai, "Hybrid Texts, Assembled Bodies: Michel Gondry's Merging of Camera and Dancer in 'Let Forever Be,'" *The International Journal of Screendance* 6 (2016). [return to page 2]
- 9. I am thinking especially of Miranda Banks's "Production Studies," *Feminist Media Histories* 4:2 (2018): 157–161; and her "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Caldwell (Routledge, 2009), 87–98.
- 10. Banks, "Production Studies," 159.
- 11. See Brynn Shiovitz's forthcoming book *Behind the Screen: Tap Dance, Race, and Invisibility During Hollywood's Golden Age* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Sima Belmar, "Behind the Screens: Race, Space, and Place in Saturday Night Fever," in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, ed. Douglas Rosenberg (Oxford University Press, 2016); and Usha, Iyer, *Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 12. See, for example, Anthea Kraut, "The Dance-in and the Re/production of White Corporeality," *The International Journal of Screendance* 10 (2019), and Kraut, "The Hollywood Dance-In: Abstract and Material Relations of Corporeal

Reproduction," Arts 8.4 (2019).

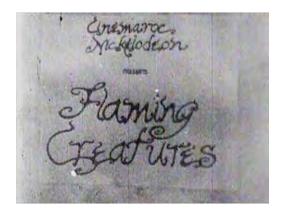
- 13. Anthea Kraut, "Female Surrogate Labor and White Corporeal Debt in Singin' in the Rain," *Camera Obscura* 36.2 (2021): 1-31.
- 14. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer, 1987): 64-81. My thinking is also indebted to the work of other dance scholars who have engaged with Spillers's distinctions between flesh and body. See especially Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, "Flesh Dance: Black Women from Behind," in *Futures of Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020); and Mlondolozi Zondi, "Haunting Gathering: Black Dance and Afro-Pessimism," *ASAP/Journal* 5.2 (2020): 256-266.
- 15. Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- 16. Stuart Heisler and Mark Sandrich, Blue Skies (16 October 1946; USA: Paramount Pictures), Film.
- 17. "Lulu-Belle" is a generic name often given to Black maids. See Berlin's original lyrics.
- 18. Lloyd Bacon, Wonder Bar (31 March 1934; USA: First National Pictures), Film.
- 19. Chava Pearl Lansky, "To Post, or Not To Post? Learn How to Curate Your Digital Dance Footprint," *Dance Magazine*, March 22, 2022, https://www.dancemagazine.com/digital-dance-footprint/. [return to page 3]
- 20. Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). [return to page 4]
- 20a. Fortnite is a video game created by Epic Games, released in 2017 and extremely popular amongst tweens all over the world. This role-playing game primarily uses a "battle royale" mechanic wherein a player's avatar fights up to 99 friends or strangers. Despite being a fighting game, Fortnite also gives players the opportunity to have their avatars dance. The dance options are called "emotes" (means of expressing emotions), and can be performed at any time during gameplay, though they seem to have been originally intended for gloating or "victory dances." Very few of the brief dances/emotes in the game are original, but none are credited to their outside sources. Most emotes must be purchased, so Epic Games profits a great deal from them.
- 21. See Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as property," *Harvard law review* (1993): 1707-1791.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The title card for Jack Smith's *Flaming*Creatures. which premiered on April 29, 1963 in New York City.





Jack Smith in Ken Jacobs' Blonde Cobra (1963)

With people as their unique selves: Jack Smith's theory of visual expression

by Adam Charles Hart

Why can't we enjoy phoniness?

Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* boasts a curious status in film history. It's been banned, prints have been seized and projectionists arrested. Its scandal reached the floors of the U.S. Senate, where it helped to derail a Supreme Court nomination. It is one of the most notorious and celebrated films of the avantgarde, a film about which countless pages have been written both about Smith's artistry and about the film's highly eventful legal history. Yet that analysis has largely ignored form except in the broadest terms. The film's sloppiness, its seemingly haphazard construction (not to mention Smith's penchant for reediting his work, sometimes during projection), has seemed to discourage critics from taking the specifics of its form seriously.

Nearly every choice made by Smith resists traditional formal analysis. Randomness tends to be ascribed to the film's structure and to Smith's specific stylistic choices. This is, of course, important: the film rejects the often fine-tuned aesthetic control that had characterized much of the avant-garde movement up until then. *Flaming Creatures* is a celebration of disorder, a breakdown of system to the point that it reads as largely nonsensical but that, of course, forms its own system. In his rejection of making sense, Smith creates his own logic, one built around the engagement between the handheld camera and his performers. This essay aims to dissect that logic, respecting the willful disruption and chaos while offering an account of the system at work in the film.

A performer who revolutionized avant-garde theater and who invigorated New York's avant-garde cinema in the early 1960s, Smith stays out of the frame in *Flaming Creatures*. It remains his most famous work as a director and the only film of his that has remained in circulation in a "finished" form, the one that would define the perception of him as a film artist. His explosively charismatic, manic inventiveness in front of the camera was replaced by a glut of less domineering performers so that Smith's creative contributions come through the mise-en-scène and his cinematography. The film would premiere on a double bill with Ken Jacobs' 1963 film *Blonde Cobra*, which Jacobs assembled from footage of Smith shot by Bob Fleischner, ensuring that in this film Smith's stature as a performer would be at the front of audience's minds, at least for its initial screening. The standard avant-garde auteurist/gestural expressionist reading of *Flaming Creatures* is that Smith's personality most directly manifests through his camerawork. But few discussions of Smith analyze the cinematography beyond his audacious use of outdated film stocks. His camerawork is taken for granted—





Blurry, fuzzy, and grainy images from *Flaming Creatures*.

presumed by supporters to be simply shaky but functional, as if his camera style were subordinate to what he was filming, and declared by detractors to be incompetent. For example, Susan Sontag found Smith to be indicative of a new trend in avant-garde cinema that she dubbed "willful technical crudity" marked by "indifference to every element of technique, a studied primitiveness."[1] [open endotes in new window]

Because of *Flaming Creatures*' notoriety, this discourse extended to the floors of the US Congress. When the Congressional record refers to *Flaming Creatures* as "badly-filmed," they might be referring to the camera's shakiness, but they're more likely responding to the blow-out and grainy images, which often resemble the results of what would be thought of as poor lighting (and perhaps poor handling of the film itself).[2] Congress held a discussion of *Flaming Creatures*' obscenity during the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominee Abe Fortas. Witnesses detail the visible genitals and sexual acts depicted but also clearly seek to dismiss work artistically—a "home-made film" whose sequences are "unrelated."[3] And in doing so, the legislators are citing professionalist standards to counter any claims that may be made about the film's value as art, painting it with the same brush as the unnamed and anonymous stag film loops also under discussion.

Yet the film's champions rarely counter such aesthetic assertions, or if they do, they do so in vague terms. In this way, playwright Ronald Tavel generalizes that it is "one of the best examples of cinematography on record," and that, "one day, in the ideal society of the future, *Creatures* will be used in film courses to teach students the proper way to shoot a movie." [4] But beyond noting "subtlety and cleverness" and "knowledge of what to do with a camera when it is turned on moving and standing objects," he gives no indication of why that might be. Most critics ignore the camerawork entirely, largely because it doesn't fit the rubric of gestural expressionism that was then beginning to be articulated by Stan Brakhage who asserted that the camera's movements register and visualize the body and psyche of the filmmaker wielding the camera. [5] Smith's collaborator Ken Jacobs is perhaps the most astute observer of Smith's cinematography when he says:

"Jack's slightly atremble hand-held camera lets us in on the secret drama within the apparent commotion, as we feel along with him ever so sensitively for optimum framing positions. The camera and the scene are making love." [6]

Flaming Creatures is indeed an exceedingly difficult film to analyze in traditional cinematic terms, and most attempts to do so focus on either the hyperspecific (a single shot or sequence) or the general (broad characterizations of tendencies within the film).









Elegant compositions discovered amidst chaos in Flaming Creatures.

Beyond the difficulties of analyzing his technique, Smith's work troubles notions of authorship in ways the avant-garde has never fully reckoned with. An artisanal mode of production in the avant-garde, of course, ensures a close identification of filmmaker and film. These are deeply personal handmade films that were often crafted with minimal or no crew so that each frame bears the mark of its maker in some clear way. Jonas Mekas, the most enthusiastic and most visible promoter of *Flaming Creatures* in the 1960s, certainly understood Smith in this way, equating Smith and Brakhage in gorgeously vivid prose. Their films create

"an impression of rough chunks of something huge that is looking in front of them which they keep breaking with their fingers and with their hearts, trying to move further; sharp and often painful chunks." [7]

Mekas's appreciation of Smith's art comes from its ambitions and imperfections, which for Mekas was "part of [Smith's] intense inner movements." [8]

Similarly for Ken Kelman, *Flaming Creatures* was distinguished from the films in which Smith performed. Kelman argues,

"Smith imposed upon the whole a sense of purpose, an intensity of feeling. His movie beats with total life.... It is a realized vision. The other have the same style, but not the imagination, the articulateness, the poetic concentration." [9]





Elaborate poses and arrangement of bodies in Flaming Creatures.

Mekas and Kelman align Smith's filmmaking with the figure of the domineering director-cinematographer who imposes their will and personality on the film through style, perhaps the primary consideration for artistry in the early 1960s avant-garde. For Jacobs, whose own work explicitly redefined film authorship, Smith's camerawork indicates the active intelligence behind the lens, searching for those "optimum framing positions"—finding elegant compositions within the

chaos. Jacobs proposes bringing Smith's camerawork in line with gestural expressionism, that sort of give-and-take language of how Mekas and Brakhage would describe their responsive camerawork.

Smith, for his part, spoke of this film almost as if it were documentary, saying little of the cinematography:

"Movies aren't something like I came to; they are my life. After *Flaming Creatures* I realized that that wasn't something I had photographed: Everything really happened. It really happened. I— that those were things I wanted to happen in my life and it wasn't something that we did, we really lived through it; you know what I mean? And it was really real. It just was. It just was almost incidental that there was a camera around." [10]





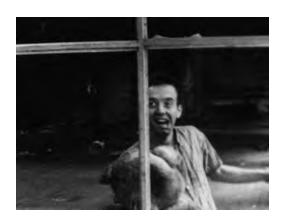




Minimal sets and front-facing performances in *Flaming Creatures*.

Considering the amount of attention paid to the camera by the actors, and the sometimes elaborate poses in which they are arranged, the latter sentiment might seem a bit disingenuous. Nonetheless, his comment indicates a blurring between his contributions and those of his performers. For Smith, the production was a realization of "things I wanted to happen in my life," but it was also an event that went beyond his control. While the interlocutors of the 1960s avant-garde sought to subsume the film's style within a rigidly auteurist reading, Smith complicates those terms by giving his actors so much freedom.[11] It's not just that his work was collaborative, but that he allowed and often empowered performers to do whatever they wanted.

Flaming Creatures was, to co-opt André Bazin's term, an "impure" mix of film, theater, and photography, with Smith's staging tending towards presentational tableaux, actors posing for the camera against Flaming Creatures' flatly artificial painted backdrops as if waiting for the photographer to say "cheese." Jacobs insightfully sees the film coming directly out of the black-and-white photo sessions that Smith was shooting at the time, characterizing Flaming Creatures as "a kind of multi-session photo shoot on one set, and, as with many of the stills,







Taylor Mead mugs for the camera in *The Flower Thief* (1960).

with a harem *houri* centering the composition."[12]

The acknowledgement of the camera by *Flaming Creatures*' performers was hardly unique, but it carried a different valence for Smith than it did for other filmmakers in the avant-garde. While Taylor Mead and co. often acknowledge the camera in Ron Rice's *The Flower Thief* (1960), winkingly goofing around in the manner of home movies, *Flaming Creature*'s actors address the camera even more insistently. That stare into the lens is not a disruption or an interruption but rather the foundation on which their performances are built. They are dancing, posing, performing for and to the camera in a manner more typical of still photography than of the cinema. Flaming Creatures begins with performers staring directly at the lens, the camera's gaze instigating the film and the performances. The film is founded on that direct engagement. There is no pretense towards a discreet diegesis, no pretense towards a narrative or narrative space that exists independent of the camera. Despite Smith's apparent insistence otherwise, the camera conjures the film's events into being: the act of filming occasions and motivates everything that happens in front of it, and the performers fully acknowledge and address that fact.

Flaming Creatures' address of the camera was part of a growing trend in the avant-garde that included not just Rice and Jacobs but also Mekas, Andy Warhol, Barbara Rubin, even Kenneth Anger. The early 1960s would see filmmakers blur the line between the performances of actors and documentary observation. Like Mead, or Smith himself, "actors" would perform for the camera without constructing a character in any traditional theatrical sense. The filming prompts their actions, prompts them to perform, but it refers to the actor as a real human being—Mead and Smith, Gerard Malanga, Mario Montez, Francis Francine, etc. They may be dressed in "exotic" costumes or covered in body paint, and they may be dancing or fucking or applying lipstick while their limbs are tangled up with those of several other actors, but they are still themselves. Once again, the closest analogue is to home movies. Or perhaps to porn.

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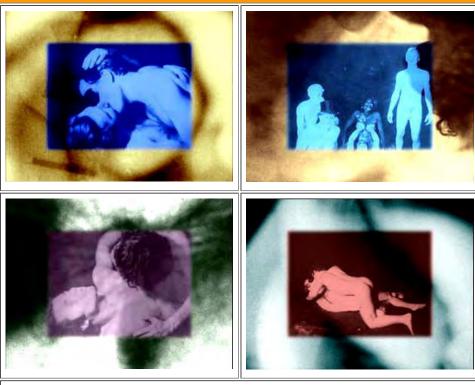
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Entangled bodies and entangled images in Barbara Rubin's Christmas on Earth.

In Rubin's *Christmas on Earth*, which also debuted in 1963, two projectors superimpose images of sex and bodies on top of each other—or rather, one within the other, the larger framing image primarily consisting of extreme close-ups of genitalia and other flesh with the smaller frame largely devoted to wider shots in which the full bodies of its performers can be seen. The actors are mostly naked, their bodies often covered in paint that transforms them into abstract forms in the confusion of superimposed images. In the description of critic Ara Osterweil, *Christmas on Earth* "depicts at least five nude bodies engaged in a ravishing array of sexual acts including genital penetration, anal sex, fellatio, cunnilingus, and masturbation."[13] [open endnotes in new window] The most easily identifiable figure in the film, Gerard Malanga, was frequently featured in Warhol films of the era, but the body paint and masks make the other actors—who included filmmaker Naomi Levine—difficult to identify by sight.

Rubin zooms in and out and shakily explores her subjects as they fuck and play and pose for her camera. Osterweil argues that the film constructs an identification with the camera itself through its movements in and out and across the bodies, a mimetic expression of the sexual act. It resists aligning its perspective with that of any individual within the scene, and the superimposed double-image as well as the anonymizing body paint frequently reduces its subjects to their sexual functions. Like *Flaming Creatures, Christmas on Earth* often seems to be a mass of body parts whose owners are not immediately apparent. But unlike Smith's performers, Malanga, Levine, and their co-stars in *Christmas on Earth* maintain a closer insistence on their identities. The body paint is abstracting, it is obscuring, but it is not transformative. It does not create a new persona for its actors. Smith, in contrast, may not be creating complex dramatic characters, but he does offer the opportunity for role-play. Rubin ends



The performers in *Christmas on Earth* wave goodbye.









Performers look into the camera in *Flaming Creatures*.

her film with the actors waving at the camera, a strangely disarming finale for a film that would have shocked and scandalizes audiences had it been more widely seen—it was, as Osterweil asserts, "the most sexually explicit American film of the 1960s."[14] And it ends with a simple gesture typical of home movies, one that implies the actors are not playing roles but simply performing as themselves.

In both Christmas on Earth and Flaming Creatures, the camera allows its performers to assert themselves—as themselves, as versions of themselves, as drag vampires or whatever other persona they've adopted—to both viewer and filmmaker. They may be abstracted, dissected, or transformed, but in the end both films insist on their subjectivity. Ultimately it is this look at or performance towards the camera that separates the queer underground from the related styles that would coalesce into "independent" or art house styles. And perhaps no filmmaker or performer exploited this as boldly or as structurally as Jack Smith. In film scholarship, the look into the camera in Smith and Rubin has often been described as a typically postmodern revelation of the apparatus, a la Godard, but Godard uses such moments as a rupture, an alienation effect shocking us out of relatively absorbing narrative worlds. By contrast, that acknowledgment forms a wholly different mode of engagement for Smith as it does for Rubin and other avant-garde filmmakers of the era. It grounds their films, no matter how outlandish or artificial the setup or the personas, in the acknowledgment of the performers.

Further, although critics might typically align this address to the camera with high modernism's anti-illusionist agenda, Smith *loved* phoniness. He wrote ecstatically in praise of phoniness and its glamorous B-movie avatar, Maria Montez. Smith is less interested in puncturing the illusions of phoniness than he is in demonstrating its marvels. Of Montez's critically dismissed output he wrote,

"They had a stilted, phony imagery that we choose to object to, but why react against that phoniness? That phoniness could be valued as rich in interest & revealing. Why do we object to not being convinced—why can't we enjoy phoniness? Why resent the patent 'phoniness' of these films—because it holds a mirror to our own, possibly."[15]

So what investment would Smith have in puncturing illusions and artificiality?

We might say that Smith is deeply invested in exploring phoniness as phoniness but not necessarily in mounting a modernist critique of it. Phoniness, he implies, should be embraced in part because we are also phony. In fact, such an approach that proved formative in early understandings of camp. Smith's relationship to camp, however, is complicated and oft disputed. As Smith's friend and collaborator Tavel pur it, "Camp and Jack Smith are two things apart. As a matter of fact, using materials natal to Camp, Smith is at the opposite pole. He is all belief." [16] Without digging too deeply into the voluminous material debating the meaning and implications of camp, suffice it to say that, in Tavel's eyes, there was no ironic distance between Smith and the objects of his mimicry. There was no critique inherent in the "moldy glamour" of Smith's productions. For Ken Jacobs, this is a perhaps-exclusionary duality: "Flaming Creatures mocks the devotees of glamour as it proclaims the faith." [17] Jacobs sees this as conflict, inscribed into the thematic structure of the film as a conflict between flesh and faith. Marc Siegel, by contrast, understands the film to be "the cinematic realization of [Smith] and his friends' erotic fantasies." Siegel sees no contradiction between the moldiness of the film's glamor and the film's transvestism and polymorphous, queer sexuality: it is all an expression of desire. The camera, and the performers' open address to it, affirms the authenticity of their expressions even when those expressions are hilariously, explicitly "phony." They are authentic in their artificiality.



Maria Montez in Robert Siodmak's *Cobra Woman* (1944), a touchstone for Smith.

Siegel follows Smith's remarks about the film capturing things that "really happened" to provocatively position *Flaming Creatures* as documentation of its creatures' desires, a staging of erotic fantasies made real by their performance. If we follow Siegel's reasoning to think of *Creatures* as a documentary, parsing the contributions of author and subject becomes a bit easier: Smith's camera captures the expressions of the performers, the film shaped out of his own responses to them. Siegel's rhetorical gambit is here understandable—his article reclaims desire and sexuality for a film that had often been written about for its "innocence" in a manner that insidiously elided its queerness. Siegel's approach subsumes the film's radical formal gambits into this idea of self-representation on the part of the performers. (For Siegel, unlike Jacobs or Mekas, the film's humor does not reject or undo its eroticism.) In doing so, however, he fails to account for the heterogeneity of the film: most obviously for my argument, the distinction between static and shaky scenes—which is to say: the distinction between the scenes in which Smith allows for an extraordinary amount of freedom in the performers' self-presentation and those in which Smith's camera breaks down his performers into body parts.





A relatively stable camera allows actors to decide their own movements.





A hand-held camera moves over the bodies of performers in close-up.

Perhaps the most thorough discussion of *Flaming Creatures* comes from Suarez, whose writings on the underground emphasize these artists' embrace of pop culture. For Suarez, this indicates the avant-garde's rethinking of notions of subjectivity, moving away from the assertive interior explorations of the 1940s and 50s avant-garde. The queer underground of the 1960s questions the idea of authentic, singular selfhood through characters whose

"inner self appears shaped by external, public images drawn from commercial culture.... The transgressive identity of the drag queens of Warhol's and Smith's films does not lie in their opposing a true self against an inauthentic world, but on subverting the very notion of self, which is affirmed instead as copy, artifice, and role-playing." [18]

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For Suarez, in *Creatures* there is "no subjective essence to be realized, no interiority where the self's truth lies dormant," and no sense of internal, conclusive revelation.[19] The film insists on "fragmentation and dissolution"; Smith's characters are "assemblages of found images."[20] This reading provides a fascinating counterpoint to that of Siegel (the two of them were writing about the film contemporaneously; neither was likely aware of the other's work), who writes of Smith's performers not as modernist subjects expressing their erotic desires, but as fragmented postmodernist subjects whose self-representations consist of complex engagements with external images. Indeed, they are phony.

Both Siegel's and Suarez's arguments are convincing, and I'd like to begin parsing them by looking at Jack Smith's own writings on authorship and expression:



Drag queen Mario Montez, who took their name from the star of *Cobra Woman*, in *Flaming Creatures*.



Marlene Dietrich in Josef Von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930).



gorgeously written, baroque explorations of knotty, twisting logic that completely rethought the role of the director in the avant-garde. As would be expected of an American avant-garde filmmaker in the 1960s, Smith wrote eloquently of the centrality of visual experience to cinema, but his conception of the visual was radically different from that of Brakhage. In his woozily radical essay "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," Smith's "visual" analysis consists entirely of discussion of Montez the actress, where he's concerned with her beauty, her unconvincing acting, her self-regard. At a time in which the U.S. avant-garde was focusing primarily on the articulate possibilities of camerawork and editing—formalism focusing on the precision of directorial control—Smith aligned his conception of visuality not with behind-the-scenes expressiveness, but with the overly self-conscious performances of a nearly-forgotten Hollywood actress.

He was all the people in his films

Smith's expanded notion of visual expression blurs the line between director and star, a line that he would further smudge in an essay on Josef von Sternberg. Here, Smith once again locates visual expression in the image of a female star, but he does so in terms of "projection": Dietrich was Von Sternberg's self-portrait in drag. Smith brilliantly inscribes not only this logic, but the complementary spectatorial logic into his analysis, eliding his own sense of identification with Dietrich with that same sense he presumes to be shared by Von Sternberg.

"His expression was that of the erotic realm—the neurotic gothic deviated sex-colored world and it was a turning inside out of himself and magnificent. You had to use your eyes to know this tho because the sound track babbled inanities—it alleged Dietrich was an honest jewel thief, noble floozy, fallen woman etc. to cover up the visuals. In the visuals she was none of those. She was V.S. himself. A flaming neurotic—nothing more nothing less—no need to know that she was rich, poor, innocent, guilty etc. Your eye if you could use it told you more interesting things (facts?) than those. Dietrich was his visual projection—a brilliant transvestite in a world of delirious unreal adventures." [21]

Smith hyperbolically literalizes and parodies precisely this dynamic with *Flaming Creatures*' drag performers—a complication for both Siegel's and Suarez's readings of the film, but especially difficult to square with Siegel. Judith Malina would later reinforce this connection between the philosophy spelled out in Smith's essay and *Flaming Creatures*, telling an interviewer,

"He was asking us to carry out his fantasy of, in some sense, himself. He was all the people in his films. The good ones, the bad ones, the females, the males, the ambiguous ones. In some way, we were he and he was us." [22]

This collapsing of subjectivities through which the performer becomes a vehicle for the director's expression is at odds with Smith's often chaotic shooting style. Smith was not a Sternberg-style dictator on set. He did not exact precisely detailed performances from his actors but, rather, permitted his performers to run roughshod across the screen—except in the film's near-frozen tableaux to which he returns repeatedly. I would suggest that this aesthetic theory is not

Jack Smith improvising in front of the camera in Ken Jacobs' *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1960).

reserved for more controlling filmmakers, but that Smith does not see a conflict between personal directorial expression and freedom in front of the camera; a performer's self-assertion can also be recognized as intensely personal and subjective for a director.

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Jack Smith in Ken Jacobs' Star Spangled to Death, which Jacobs began filming in 1957 and completed in 2003.



Smith engaging with the camera in *Blonde Cobra*.

If his understanding of Dietrich was brutally reductive, his hosannas for Maria Montez resist any such sublimation on the part of her mediocre film directors. Montez was, for Smith, an irreducible, incendiary presence whose films "TRANSCEND FILM TECHNIQUE. Not barely, but resoundingly, meaningfully, with magnificence, with the vigor that one exposed human being always has—and with failure." [23] [open endnotes in new window] Her "atrocious" acting was inextricably wrapped up in the glory of her performance: "Her real concerns (her convictions of beauty / her beauty) were the main concern—her acting had to be secondary." For Smith, "bad" acting, and bad scripts, could be a technique for what he called "visual revelation"—which he opposed to narrative. [25]

Like Mekas, Smith wrote of "good technique"—and narrative—as being obfuscatory, blocking out more personal expressions, something "people hide behind when they are frightened by something they wouldn't like in themselves." [26] And if the reliance on conventions results in "BANAL—UNTRUE MOVIES—IMPERSONAL MOVIES," [27] then he subtly problematizes the notion of the personal. In his "Belated Appreciation" of Josef von Sternberg he does indeed ignore Dietrich's artistic contributions to their collaborations and disparages her acting, but in doing so indicates that the "failure" is a productive one, and one for which von Sternberg deserves credit:

"He would let her struggle hopelessly with bad lines she couldn't handle even if she were an actress. He let her acting become as bad as it could become for her.... For he was concerned with personal, intuitive, emotional values—values he found within himself—not in a script. With people as their unique selves, not chessmen in a script." [28]

The "personal" here seems to encompass Von Sternberg and Dietrich. Von Sternberg's script and direction prompted a terrible performance in Dietrich that revealed something of Dietrich the person (rather than Dietrich the actor), and therefore transcended the banal scripts. And Von Sternberg supposedly saw something of himself in the truth of her bad performance. There is, in Smith's account, an element of a condescending and misogynistically-tinged auteurist reading, but there is also an acknowledgment of Dietrich's self-revelation. Smith wasn't interested in acting as we might commonly understand it, but in self-presentation. And therefore any film in which he was interested would need to negotiate between the self-presentation of the performers and the design of the director. Smith's choice of the notoriously precise, exacting Von Sternberg seems to reveal an implicit bias towards directorial control, of course, but that makes Smith's near critical neglect of the actual camerawork in Von Sternberg's films even more revealing. Their true locus of visual expression, for Smith, comes in Dietrich's performances.

Smith, as the 1960's single most important performer in U.S. avant-garde film (and arguably also avant-garde theater), was obviously inclined towards the expressive possibilities of an actor. And just as he engaged his performers through his camera, as a performer he directly addressed both the camera and its operator, attracting and often seeming to control the gaze from in front of the lens. Smith's frantic movements in *Queen of Sheba* result in Ron Rice's dropping to the floor to capture his actor's explosive performance in close-up. Bob Fleischner's camera in *Blonde Cobra* wanders across Smith's face and body, but it









The opening images of Flaming Creatures.

also wanders with Smith. As a performer, Smith requires not just a responsive camera but an engaged one, working in collaboration. Smith often seems to be directing from in front of the camera. [29] When he encountered a more unresponsive director, Andy Warhol in their ill-fated, never-finished collaboration *Batman/Dracula*, he was thoroughly frustrated that the camera failed to follow him. "Most of my best acting was offscreen!" he reportedly complained. [30]

So this address of the camera is clearly central to Smith as both filmmaker and an actor, with the mobility and flexibility of handheld camerawork being essential to balancing this collaboration: if the performer is to sustain the look of the camera, the camera must be able to follow them. To borrow a phrase from Maya Deren and Brakhage, it's a kind of film dance, but one in which movement is less important than is its sustained intimate directness. *Flaming Creatures* is shot entirely handheld, but it rarely features the kind of responsive camera that we see from Rice, and it's hardly interested in the articulate subjectivity of Brakhage or later Mekas. Rice's camera nimbly keeps up with Mead and Smith, but there's a baroque stateliness to *Flaming Creatures* that comes from its tableau-like posings. Smith sets up his performers so that the sort of manic unpredictability that characterizes his own performances is rarely a consideration. But those stares into the camera indicate a collaboration, a collusion, between actor and camera. [31]

Flaming Creatures: on the verge of order

If Smith's theory of visual expression focuses on performance rather than cinematography or editing, that exhibitionist, self-presentational style of his actors can only exist in collusion with the camera. They are not addressing a vague, unseen audience on the other side of the screen, but the camera wielded by Smith. The film moves from presentational performances—dancing, mugging, posing—in front of a delightfully unconvincing painted backdrop to still poses and a more active camera parsing the mush of bodies. That is, the film contains both relatively static medium-long shots of its performers and shots in which the camerawork explicitly signals Smith's directorial intervention. Smith builds that tension between seemingly autonomous self-expression on the part of the performers and high levels of directorial control into the structure of his film. Filmmaking is, fittingly for Smith, first and foremost a mode of engagement between director and actor.

Flaming Creatures begins with performers staring directly into the camera, the image so faded and grainy as to largely obscure other details. A woman fluffs her giant hair next to a nearly motionless shirtless man in a mask, all in a tableau-like MLS. Into this milky, grainy swirl a woman pops up from below the frame for a close-up, primping for the camera and mostly blocking out the woman behind her. As the woman in CU continues staring into the camera in mock-glamorous poses, the faded quality of image almost conceals the camera movement that follows: the handheld camera tracks forward while maintaining its CU until the woman in front glides out of frame to reveal that the camera has reached the woman behind her. The murky image mostly hides a jump cut as camera and actress move even closer to a barely-discernible extreme close-up of her face. The "slightly atremble" camera moves slightly back and then forward before she moves to the left to reveal the title card hanging in the background. She and her hair will shortly move back into frame to block the hand-painted faux-ornate lettering behind her. The camera then floats across a pile of bodies being disrobed and jiggled, followed by a jump cut to a horizontal woman with puckered lips. The next shot lingers on a hand-painted cast list, occasionally blocked by the shirtless



A performer sticks her tongue out at the camera in *Flaming Creatures*.



Obscured credits at the beginning of *Flaming Creatures*.



A chaotic jumble of bodies dancing for the camera.

man in a mask and the foregrounded woman from the first shot.

The first several minutes follow this same pattern of credits obscured by figures playfully moving in and out of frame, alternated with floating handheld shots exploring what we will soon understand to be figures in the orgy. Shots of women puckering their lips—and, in one shot, a woman sticking out her tongue—are scattered throughout this sequence.

A curious opening for an avant-garde film, but one which spells out its structure: a rough alternation between handheld explorations of bodies and comparatively static tableaux of performers directly addressing the camera. In playfully blocking the credits while the camera lingers, the film already complicates authorship as the names and images of performers compete for dominance within the frame. The performers dance and move with the camera, pouting and puckering as if making love to the camera, but equally acknowledging the distance between themselves and the lens. Just as Maria Montez's self-contained performances, in Smith's mind, refashioned the camera into a sort of mirror to reflect her own beauty and elegance, performances in Smith's films are never without selfconscious reflection on the performer's own image. (The image of puckered lips is revealing: one doesn't pucker to actually kiss someone, but to mime the act of kissing. Or to apply lipstick, as will quickly become relevant in the film.) It presents a dialectic between Smith's mobile camera asserting his presence as director/cameraperson—one that becomes more pronounced in the disorienting shots moving over and between the bodies. But these are performances that block out and distract from the names behind them (which, thanks to both the exotic calligraphy and the murky image, are already difficult to read), removing that selfpresentation from its grounding in public, official identities. It is also, of course, Smith obscuring the names of his collaborators, while calling attention to them in what is an extraordinarily long "credits sequence."

In the first scene, the performers implicitly declare the camera to be the reason and motivation for their performances. They are not addressing each other—in fact, they're barely interacting with each other—but rather engaging with the camera, blocking each other in bids for gaining the camera's attention. The disparity between the camera's sluggish responsiveness to those pleas and the wandering close up camerawork weaving through bodies indicates a slightly sluggish engagement, far from the hyperactive responsiveness of other filmmakers in the avant-garde like Brakhage or Mekas. It is in the more jittery interludes that Smith's control is at its most explicit and direct, as he is not only controlling the camera but clearly controlling the performers as well. (This impulse will find another manifestation in the film's posed still compositions.) But the first shot distinguishes the film from the theatrical presentation it sometimes resembles because the performers are not simply facing the camera or performing for it, but the camera is, subtly, listlessly, responding. Or, perhaps, its forward, slightly shaky momentum indicates the possibility of responsiveness, a potential that is rarely explicitly emphasized in the camerawork. The fact that the film's close-ups break down bodies into parts whose ownership is difficult, sometimes impossible, to detect, only complicates the film's notion of identity further. The film allows for a wild sort of fantasist self-presentation but also reduces its actors to piles of flesh and erogenous zones. It poses their bodies unnaturally (and hilariously) in still tableaux, mere figures in a composition, but also unleashes individualized chaos as every performer dances freely in a jumble.

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Francis Francine and other "creatures" attack Sheila Bick in *Flaming Creatures*.

The camera makes itself most known later in the film during the film's infamous assault—the pinnacle of the film's aesthetic of chaos. Drag queen Francis Francine chases Sheila Bick playfully back and forth in front of the camera. As soon as she catches up with Bick, the camera starts to shake violently. It will do so again several shots later, giving the effect of the set itself shaking. This vehement shaking aligns the camera with the *mise-en-scène*: it is no longer a directorial interpretation of the profilmic, but an indicator, perhaps an instigator, of movement in front of the camera. It calls attention to directorial intervention. And it provocatively aligns that intervention with assault.

That sense of intervention defines the underground and separates it from related, more narratively oriented films, and also from the early works of direct cinema documentaries that sprung up alongside it. *Flaming Creatures* establishes not just an acknowledgment of the camera, but of a director who actively shapes the action onscreen. The handheld camera serves to remind the viewer of Smith's directorial engagement with his performers. Smith's camera reshapes the bodies he photographs. But those sequences alternate with sequences allowing his performers an extraordinary amount of freedom in front of the camera. In the end, Smith implicitly equates his own control over the performers to sexual assault, and he does so at the moment of the film's most frenetic, most noticeable camerawork. The assault and the destructive earthquake that seem to result from the transgression exceed recording, exceed responsiveness: the assault imposes a diegetic event on the performers.





Compositions of tangled bodies captured by Smith's handheld camera.

That is, this is the moment at which Smiths' directorial style most visibly violates the autonomy of his performers. The collaboration that is foregrounded through the performers' stare into the camera is here overwhelmed by the camera. The tense dialectic between performer and director is decisively taken over by Smith, but that assertion leads to destruction. If the film slowly repopulates itself through the rejuvenating efforts of its vampire dance party, it ends on an ominous note as the camera once again begins to shake. But, before destruction can once again rain down on the creatures, the film ends.

The narrative, such as it is, is cyclical: joy leads to frenzy which leads to destruction. The pieces can be reshuffled to some degree while maintaining that basic pattern. The randomness and incoherence that so many critics have decried is not a lack of structure, but a structure built around tensions within and between images, and an adherence to a cyclical narrative pattern in which one image does



A creature rises from their coffin after the attack and the ensuing destruction.

not necessarily have a causal relationship to the one that follows it. There are seemingly discrete sections of the film, and there are shots or brief sequences that stand out from those around it: all are part of the larger tensions that structure the film between chaos and the imposition of order. The chaos itself teeters between joyful exuberance and danger, and it's often hilarious in its various jigglings and absurd compositions featuring nipples and cocks and a variety of other body parts, often in surprising combinations.





Dirty jokes in the compositions of Flaming Creatures.

The film's most famous sequence, in which the film suddenly transforms into a commercial for lipstick, is a kind of mission statement for the film. As Smith's camera shakily observes his performers covering their lips with a dark lipstick, wandering over and between them as they compulsively and unceasingly move around their lips over and over, an unseen narrator offers a typical advertising testimonial to the uses and benefits of this particular brand. The sequence begins with proper—if extremely shaky—close-ups, then starts floating and moving up and down their bodies, which seem more and more intertwined with each shot as the sequence progresses. Jack Smith himself, in his cartoonish low drawl, interrupts the narrator to ask, "Is there a lipstick that doesn't come off when you suck cocks?" To which the narrator quickly replies, "Yes, indelible lipstick." Smith counters, "But how does a man get lipstick off his cock?" The narrator once again is ready with a reply: "A man is not supposed to have lipstick on his cock. It's supposed to be indelible and therefore supposed to remain on her lips." And he then resumes his sales pitch.

During all the this, the camera has started floating over a pile of flesh belonging to several different performers, the owner being identifiable only when their face is visible onscreen (with lipstick being applied, of course). The mess of bodies and Smith's wandering camerawork doesn't just anonymize those bodies, it blends them, exuberantly detaching identity from flesh, including genitalia. The images serve to reject and parody the rigidly deterministic gender conventions adhered to by the narrator. It offers drag queens and naked bodies in response to the narrator's formal sales pitch, delivered in familiar advertising language and aimed at a proper lady, but it also offers masculine-seeming men, including one with a beard, applying lipstick. Even when the performers seem to be following the









The creatures apply their lipstick.

narrator's lead, puckering their lips for the camera, they mock the advertising form, the parade of lips shown as the narrator returns to his initial speech quickly growing absurd, even more so when audible. When a cock appears on the shoulder of a man applying lipstick, the narrator seems to lose his cool, letting out a low yelp mid-sentence and asking "Are you the woman or the man?" before finally finishing his ad copy recitation.

I relate this as if the narrator were transparently responding to the images and vice-versa, as sometimes seems to be the case. But it is more productive to think of the two elements as being in tension with each other, each offering a counter without aligning precisely from shot to shot or sentence to sentence. The narrator offers order, the performers and the camera offer chaos that is in this sequence joyful and hilarious, parodying gender, sexuality, and commercialism all at once. The flaming creatures—and Smith himself—reject the narrator's attempts to impose an order on them.

But the voiceover is a brief interlude in a film largely scored by musical exotica from Smith's record collection. If handheld camerawork is, for Smith, a means of negotiating the engagement between director and performer, his camera dramatizes the authorial tension between him and his creatures. He uses handheld shakiness to signal his interventions and to call attention to his directorial control. He never adopts the sort of collusive address that characterizes many of the films in which he acts, and which would otherwise be synonymous with the 60s underground. In this refusal, *Flaming Creatures* asserts its most radical rewriting of cinematographic theory, complicating the assumptions about authorship made by both the auteuristcritics and the avant-garde.

Film, for Smith, was not merely collaboration but conflict between the self-presentation of performers and the director's control over them. But that conflict is hugely generative. Directorial control does not negate the contributions of his performers; rather, the handheld camerawork sets up a dialectic between the performer's contributions and the arrangement of elements performed behind the camera. The camera is here aligned with Smith in a similar way to the gestural, domineering cameras ascribed to the film by Jacobs and Mekas, but it is not necessarily somatic. It registers less the *responses* of Smith than it does his art direction, his active efforts at composition. It is an intentional camera movement that displaces the impulses of directorial mise-en-scene into his constant reframings, his sometimes very shaky framing being his own kind of imposition onto the scene. They are his interpretation, his own very personal visual expression carved out of the performance of others.

The film is spotted with shots that essentially imitate still photographs. As Jacobs points out, these shots come straight out of the black and white photography Smith was doing at the time, turning the film into a kind of collection of photographic tableaux, occasionally animated but also sometimes awkwardly, hilariously posed and stationary. The artificiality—the phoniness—of these shots is blatant, not just in the actors' stillness, but in the unlikely, unnatural poses concocted by Smith. The handheld camera provides the flipside of these shots. Whereas the tableaux draw attention to Smith's virtuosic sense of composition, the handheld camera shows a sort of documentation of Smith's attempt to find and create compositions within a writhing, messy mise-en-scene of body parts.

This is less his subjective response to the profilmic scene he had created than a flaunting of his process, exposing his efforts to find suitably affecting close-up compositions. The tableaux in medium shot, handheld camera wandering over bodies in close-up—the latter sharply distinguishing the film from the other media that it so often resembles. And yet, by including the tableaux, Smith suggests the possibility of another kind of order—though a supremely obscure one: a photographic order. The handheld camera, interspersed with these tableaux, animates the images—but it also places the director in opposition to their actors. In *Creatures*, directorial control over the image, signaled by the handheld camera, cannot exist simultaneously with Smith's celebration of its performances.

Smith's great insight is that there is truth in any kind of performance, that there is truth in artificiality and in fantasy. There is truth in phoniness. For Smith, the constructed persona is itself an authentic expression of self. His is a kind of realism that depends not on imitation or resemblance to reality or more conventionally "realistic" film styles, but on the revelatory aspects of artifice. And thus Flaming Creatures is a treatise on the truth of fantasy, structured circularly so that the fantasy is always crumbling and always returning—the better to be reedited and re-structured on the fly at Smith's screenings. Flaming Creatures embraces everything-and everyone-that Hollywood and, really, the rest of cinema find to be ugly and obscene. Smith declares it to be beautiful. His camera aesthetic is a pungent expression of Smith's "hatred of capitalism," but it also offers an alternative kind of utopian ideal, based not in industrial fantasies but more personal and idiosyncratic ones. And for all of the sexuality on display in the film, these personal fantasies might be thought of expressions of self rather than desire, suggestions that identity is realized through performance. But that performance needs to include the act of filmmaking, of wielding the camera. Smith's efforts to create images of others—often absurd, mostly obscene, sometimes disturbing—that could also be his own, very personal expression, subverted not just normative capitalist tastes but also those of the avant-garde.

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Notes

- 1. Susan Sontag, "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*," in *Against Interpretation*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1992: 207. Originally published in *The Nation*, April 13, 1964. Sontag notes the image's lavish density, the sheer, delightful quantity of incident and interest within the frame, but can offer little parsing of those images beyond noting their purely aesthetic pleasures. [return to pag 1]
- 2. See "Nominations of Abe Fortas and Homer Thornberry: Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, Ninetieth Congress, Second Session, on Nomination of Abe Fortas, of Tennessee, To Be Chief Justice of the United States, and Nomination of Homer Thornberry, of Texas, To Be Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968: 1172. The definitive account of the legal battles over *Flaming Creatures* is Brian L. Frye's "Dialectic of Obscenity," *Hamline Law Review* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2012), 229-278.
- 3. Even its most politically prominent defenders saw little value in it. The Yale Law School held an "Abe Fortas Film Festival" in 1968 to "show it was mad for the Senators to criticize Justice Fortas on these grounds," said one of the organizers. "Flaming Creatures is a harmless, stupid stag movie." "Yale Law School Holds 'Fortas Film Festival," New York Times, November 5, 1968, 40.
- 4. Ronald Tavel, "The Theatre of the Ridiculous," *Tri-Quarterly* 6 (Winter 1966), 103.
- 5. See Adam Charles Hart, "Extensions of Our Body Moving, Dancing: The American Avant-Garde's Theories of Handheld Subjectivity," *Discourse* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2019), 37-67.
- 6. Ken Jacobs, "Thanks for Explaining Me: Jack Smith at PS1," *Aperture* 152 (Fall 1998), 74.
- 7. Jonas Mekas, Movie Journal, "On Losey" (Sept 19, 1963), 103.
- 8. Ibid 102
- 9. Ken Kelman, "Smith Myth," in *The Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000, 281.
- 10. Jonas Mekas, "The Underground and the Flaherty Film Seminar (Sept. 12, 1963)," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 101.
- 11. The primary rival here would be, of course, Smith's onetime friend and collaborator Ken Jacobs. But I would argue that the valence is revealingly different for Jacobs. His found footage films and other assemblages were audacious acts of appropriation, disconnecting authorship from gestural

- expressionism but also proposing a sort of ownership of found material. For a thorough account of the making of *Blonde Cobra*, and the contributions of both Smith and Jacobs, see Ann Reynolds, "A History of Failure," *Criticism* 56, No. 2 (Spring 2014), 187-209.
- 12. Jacobs, "Thanks for Explaining Me," 76.
- 13. Osterweil, "Saint Barbara: An Afterword," in *Film Culture* 80, "The Legend of Barbara Rubin" special issue, 197. Osterweil's authoritative writings on Rubin also include her essay "The Apocryphal, Ecstatic Cinema of Barbara Rubin," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, ed. Robin Blaetz. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007: 127-151, as well as a chapter in Osterweil's book *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in Avant-Garde Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. [return to page 2]
- 14. Osterweil, "Saint Barbara," 197.
- 15. Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, eds. J. Hoberman & Edward Leffingwell. New York: High Risk Books, 1997, 33.
- 16. Ronald Tavel, "The Theatre of the Ridiculous," *Tri-Quarterly* 6 (Winter 1996), 104.
- 17. Ken Jacobs, "Thanks for Explaining Me: Jack Smith at P.S. 1," *Aperture* 152 (Fall 1998), 74.
- 18. Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996, 134.
- 19. Ibid, 191.
- 20. Ibid, 193-196.
- 21. Jack Smith, "Belated Appreciation of V.S.," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, eds. J. Hoberman & Edward Leffingwell. New York: High Risk Books, 1997, 42.
- 22. Quoted in *Jack Smith and The Destruction of Atlantis* (2005), dir. Mary Jordan.
- 23. Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, eds. J. Hoberman & Edward Leffingwell. New York: High Risk Books, 1997, 30. [return to p. 3]
- 24. Ibid, 34. As with his dismissal of Dietrich, his insistence on Montez's power coming through her total lack of artistry bears more than a whiff of misogynistic condescension. Suarez notes that this misogyny finds a far more troubling (and unfortunately more conventional) outlet in the *Flaming Creature*'s sexual assaults, which, for the expansiveness of the film's gender and sexuality, focus on a biological female. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*, 185. For Stefan Brecht, the performance of faux-helplessness clearly indicates that this is a "mock-rape," ironizing the central event of a film that is, for Brecht, suffused with "a searing irony" throughout. Brecht, *Queer Theatre*. London: Methuen London Ltd, 1986, 24-25.
- 25. Smith, "Belated Appreciation of V.S.," 42.
- 26. Ibid, 43.

27. Ibid, 43.

28. Ibid, 42.

- 29. Callie Angel's account of the filming of *Batman/Dracula* indicates a neat division of labor between Smith and Warhol that makes Smith's controlling role from in front of the camera explicit: "While Warhol paid for, shot, and edited the film, and facilitated the production, Smith played the title role, assembled the props, arranged the actors... and directed, from within the movie, the improvisations from which each scene was constructed." Callie Angel, "Batman and Dracula: The Collaborations of Jack Smith and Andy Warhol," *Criticism* 56, No. 2 (Spring 2014), 169.
- 30. As related by filmmaker George Kuchar in *Jack Smith and The Destruction of Atlantis* (2005), dir. Mary Jordan.
- 31. Michael Moon suggests that this was more than a stare at the camera: it is a stare into the audience. Like Siegel, Moon was writing in part to resurrect the erotic dimension of *Flaming Creatures*, one of the few writers to see truly sensual possibilities in Smith's jiggly burlesque on sex and gender. It is, indeed, a film that for most writers seems to evacuate the erotic from its polymorphous gropings and flashings, but just because it finds bodies funny doesn't mean it can't also find them appealing. For Moon, those stares at the camera are stares of desire, a kind of looking that would be rare from women and utterly forbidden from gay men on U.S. screens. But the first and foremost object of their affection is the camera itself. And Smith and his camera respond in kind. Moon, "Flaming Closets," *October* 51 (Winter 1989), 28-50.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Queer Representations in Chinese-language Film and the Cultural Landscape

Chao's book is one of the first and most comprehensive scholarly texts that look at media representations and cultural performances in the Chinese and Sinophone worlds with an innovative, broadly defined *tongzhi*/queer lens.

Queering/queered Chineselanguage cinematic and cultural imaginaries

review by Jamie J. Zhao

Queer Representations in Chinese-Language Film and the Cultural Landscape by Shi-Yan Chao (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020). 412 pages, € 129.00 (\$145), hardback.

The publication of the monograph *Queer Representations in Chinese-Language Film and Cultural Landscape* in 2020 initiated a rich, groundbreaking scholarly dialogue on the study not only of film, TV, and digital media but also opera, art, literature, and activism in the Sinosphere through queer and feminist perspectives. Its contributions to existing English-language scholarship on queer Chinese and Sinophone media and cultures are manifold. (For other significant publications published in the 21st century in the field, see, for example, Bao, 2018, 2020, 2021; Berry, Martin & Yue, 2003; Chiang & Heinrich, 2014; Chiang & Wong, 2020; Engebretsen & Shroeder, 2015; Leung, 2008; Lim, 2006; Liu, 2015; Martin, 2010; Martin et al., 2008.) [open reference page in new window]

As the inclusion of "Chinese-language" in the title indicates, the book draws on what film scholar Chris Berry (2012) has conceptualized as a "transnational turn" in English-language Chinese film studies to highlight the differences and (inter-)connections of diverse queer media industries and landscapes that "could be called 'Chinese'" (p. 497). This book, the first monograph of the author, Shi-yan Chao, covers queer media cultures in three major "Chinese" sites (Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) and is an ambitious, comprehensive work. With over 400 pages, it consists of an introduction, three major sections (each containing two chapters), a short conclusion, and a ten-page bilingual filmography listing all the queer media materials discussed in the writing.



The 2019 Hong Kong Gay Parade held on November 16, 2019, image from Hong Kong Pride Parade 2022 - GlobalGiving. The images on this page demonstrate the distinct sociopolitical environments for the three major Chinesespeaking societies, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China in the second decade of 21st century. In the book, the author discusses in detail the convoluted modern histories concerning nonnormative gender and sexual cultures that have contributed to the discrepancies of LGBTQ realities and media landscapes in the three societies nowadays.

As noted in previous studies, Mainland China (also known as the People's Republic of China or PRC) has always been a largely heteropatriarchal, homophobic, authoritarian nation-state, even though it officially decriminalized homosexuality in 1997 and subsequently depathologized homosexuality in 2001. The PRC government has constantly censored explicit homosexual content in media and public spaces, deemed homosexuality "obscene," "abnormal," "vulgar," or "immoral" (Bao, 2021, p. 31; Shaw & Zhang, 2017, p. 273; Yang & Xu, 2016, p. 169), and cracked down on LGBTQ film festivals, gathering spaces, and communicative platforms (Zhao, Yang & Lavin, 2017, pp. xi-xxxiii). In contrast, its special administrative region, Hong Kong, is an intriguing, cosmopolitan geolocale that has been famous for its globally influential film industry. Yet, in the post-1997 years, it has also been unwillingly caught between the Chinese Communist Party's political governance and its British colonial legacy. (Hong Kong was colonized by the British Empire beginning in 1841, but was handed over to the PRC in 1997). Hong Kong is thus believed to have a more "dystopian, rhizomatic, and multidirectional" queer media culture, which has been theorized as "postcoloniality beyond China-centrism" (Wong, 2020, p. 63).



Taiwan tongzhi (LGBTQ) groups participated in the 2015 Hong Kong Gay Parade, image from the online article by Patru Bogdan at Hong Kong Pride flooded the streets | Meaws - Gay Site providing cool gay stories and articles.



The logo of Shanghai PRIDE which was the largest LGBT event held in Mainland China from 2009 and 2020 and featured an annual Shanghai PRIDE film festival. It shut down in 2020 due to the authorities' rising political interference in organizing the event.

Diverging from these two "Chinese-speaking" societies, the "other China," Taiwan, (also known as the Republic of China or ROC) has been considered one of the most progressive Asian countries in terms of the progress of its feminist and queer movements (e.g., it elected its first woman president in 2016, who also happened to be unmarried and of mixed Han-indigenous Paiwan background; and Taiwan in 2019 became the first Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage). Nevertheless, Taiwan's mediascape has also been largely shaped, if not frustrated, by tensions among its indigenous groups. The island's long settler colonial history has been influenced by East Asian, Southeast Asian, and European cultures, and its two contemporary political parties. (The parties are the Kuomingtang, KMT, or Nationalist party which retreated from Mainland China to the island in 1949 and maintained postwar martial law till 1987; and the Democratic Progressive Party or DPP which "continues to bid for Taiwanese independence" from the PRC. Cheng, 2020, p. 44). This intricate situation of entangled gender, ethnic, and sexual minority histories and cultures in Taiwan has created a relatively queerfriendly yet self-contradictory queer media environment. Contemporary Taiwan's queer mediascape has continually negotiated with local, inter-Asian, and transnational sociocultural, political, and economic forces, such as Western, Japanese, and traditional Chinese gender and sexual ideologies (see Cheng, 2020; Martin, 2010). Chao's writing thoroughly unfolds these nuances as his book simultaneously differentiates between and links the queer media industries and cultures in these three Chinese-speaking societies.



A flyer for the third Taiwan International Queer Film Festival (TIQFF) in

2016, image from cheercut.com

Chao explores a broad array of important, pioneering ideas and topics including

- · Taiwanese familial systems and queer films,
- Mainland Chinese lesbian documentaries,
- queer readings of socialist Chinese melodramas of the 1960s,
- the queer potential of Chinese-language operas,
- queer connotations in premodern, classical Chinese epics and mythologies, and
- various types of camp discourses in mass and queer media from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Although there have been some studies discussing transgender figures, cross-dressing performances, and homosocial and homoerotic narratives in Chinese-language cinemas (e.g., Tan, 2000, 2007; Wu, 2010), Chao pays careful attention to the queer characteristics and traditions of diverse Chinese dialect operas, such as Shaoxing and Cantonese operas, gendered performances and beauty norms in indigenous Taiwanese culture, and local religious rituals that are constantly appropriated in contemporary official



The logo of Shanghai PRIDE which was the largest LGBT event held in Mainland China from 2009 and 2020 and featured an annual Shanghai PRIDE film festival. It shut down in 2020 due to the authorities' rising political interference in organizing the event.



A screen capture of Taiwan queer director Tsai Ming-liang's film *Days* (2020), which was selected as the opening film of the Beijing Queer Film Festival in 2021.

political discourse and entertainment media productions. His attention to these modes of discourse unveils another queer layer of Chinese-language media and cultural landscapes. This subtle queer nature of Chinese-language theater, performing arts, and religious beliefs and practices, as well as crossmedia adaptations, has often been undervalued if not completely ignored in existing queer Asian, Chinese, and Sinophone scholarship.

Relevant to this emphasis on the queerness of different "Chinese-language" cultures is Chao's use of the word "Sinophone." The two terms are often used interchangeably in his writing. However, some scholars tend to exclude China from Sinophone studies, which is considered a radical way to undermine the ethnic-Han-centrism that "privileges China as the original homeland" for Chinese-speaking communities in other parts of the world (Yue, 2012, p. 96) and to highlight "the value of difficulty, difference and heterogeneity" in imagining Chineseness (Shih, 2007, p. 5). Other writers, especially some film scholars, use "Sinophone" to include China as well as Chinese dialects and Chinese-language cultures in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other diasporic communities—a move which acknowledges both regionalism and transnationalism in the circulation of Chinese-language media and sociocultural traditions (Lu, 2007; Martin, 2010; Yue, 2012).

As queer Sinophone scholar Fran Martin (2014) eloquently states, these two ways of conceptualizing "Sinophone" highlight the "tensions between what might be called centripetal versus centrifugal understandings [of Chineseness]" (p. 36). In line with this view, Chao's "loose" uses of the terms "Chinese-language" and "Sinophone" in the book also serve as a friendly gesture that encourages a productive approach to recognizing both the roots (the regionalism that "problematizes Sino-centrism as a force that constitutes Chinese identity and representation") and routes (the transnationalism that "confronts the flows that affect the political economy of" Chinese-language cinema and media) of imagining Chinese queer cultures and lives (Yue, 2012, p. 97; also see, Chiang & Wong, 2020, p. 10; Martin, 2014, p. 36).

This dual emphasis on Chinese roots and routes in studying queer Chinese-language cinema and other media has been most evident in the existing scholarly debates concerning the translinguistic traveling and mutations of the two terms, queer (*ku'er*) and *tongzhi* ("comrade"; the Chinese phrase for gay) across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China through the transgeocultural circulation of queer Chinese-language cinemas (Bao, 2018; Lim, 2006).

The term tongzhi was "effectively mobilized to refer to people sharing the



The screen capture is from one of the earliest queer fiction films in Mainland China, *Feeding Boys, Ayaya* (2003) directed by the Beijing-based queer auteur Cui Zi'en. This film was criticized for its obscure visual-narrative styles. It tells a story of a big brother who is a devout Christian and tries his best to persuade his younger brother and the other young men he meets to give up their job as sex workers (for men). The capture shows two young men playing with condoms and discussing the kind of sex they like.



The screen capture is from the first gay-themed Taiwanese film *Outcasts* released in 1986 (near the end of the New Cinema movement in Taiwan and one year before the overturning of the KMT's martial law). The film's story is adapted from the famous 1983 gay novel, *Crystal Boys* written by the Taiwanese author Pai Hsien-yung. The Chinese title for both the film and the novel is *Niezi*, which literally means "sinful sons" (Guo, 2011). It has become a widely used word to refer to gay men since the mid-1980s in Taiwan. The capture shows the protagonist telling his gay lover that he needs to go home.

same political ideals" in modern and contemporary China (Bao, 2018, p. 69), and was closely "associated with rebelliousness during its use in anti-Qing uprisings at the end of the imperial period and continued to be used by both Nationalists and Communists" in modern China (Engebretsen & Schroeder, 2015, pp. 4-5). Since the mid-1990s, the term has become more common in denoting non-heterosexual desire and subjectivity both in Chinese-speaking lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities and in official media (Lim, 2006, p. 12). The popularity of the use of tongzhi in the Chinese-speaking world helps to "acknowledge the temporal coevality (the 1990s) of its circulation with the emergence of representations of male homosexuality in cinemas from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong" (Lim, 2006, p. 12). At the same time, the creative use of this socialist term "reflects both a conscious departure from the socialist past and the desire to become fully a member of global neoliberal capitalism on the part of many members of the varied LGBT communities in Chinese-speaking contexts," which ultimately demonstrates a surge in transcultural tongzhi media and activism in the Sinophere (Bao, 2011, p. 133, 2018; also see, Rofel, 2007).

In a dissimilar way, the Western-originated term, "queer," has become popular and was translated as *ku'er* ("cool kid") or *guaitai* ("weirdo") in 1990s' Taiwan (Lim, 2006, p. 12). Queer/*ku'er* was officially introduced to Mainland China through Beijing-based sociologist Li Yinhe's scholarly translation of Western feminist and queer theories in 2003 (Bao, 2018, pp. 29–30). Around the same time, in the early 2000s, the term was quickly adopted by many Mainland Chinese filmmakers and artists to denote a form of aesthetic avant-gardism (Bao, 2018, p. 30). This trajectory led to the double meanings of queer/*ku'er* in the Chinese-speaking world as either subversive, cosmopolitan, and avant-garde, or as a self-identification point for nonnormative gender and sexual minorities (or both).

In the introduction to Chao's book, "Processing *Tongzhi*/Queer Imaginaries," the terms *tongzhi* and queer are carefully discussed in relation to the social-political atmospheres of the three Chinese-speaking societies and their media landscapes. Drawing on the existing conceptualization of the two terms, Chao presents the translocal genealogy of *tongzhi*/queer cultures in Chinese-speaking societies and historizes Chinese-language (*huayu*) film and media studies. He also spells out the differences between the two terms in the Chinese-speaking context, his creative combination of them, and their potential:

"While *tongzhi* emphasizes identity and serves as the rallying call for social movements, queer defies fixed identity categories and stresses the heterogeneity of both identity and human subjects. ... By stressing the term *tongzhi* in this project, I include a more affirmative connotation in terms of identity politics than the word 'queer' tends to do. By using '*tongzhi*/queer,' jointly or in parallel, I aim to capture the nuanced dynamics between *tongzhi* and queer politics, and those of social movements and media representations." (Chao, p. 15)

With a growing number of English-language academic publications using the



A screen capture from *Rebels of the Neon God* shows that after a visit to the local Taiwanese Phoenix Temple, the mother is telling the father that the Taoist priestess believes that the protagonist (their intractable son) is the reincarnation of the controversial cultural icon in Chinese mythology, Nezha, who went through radical confrontations with the family-based social system.



A screen capture from the second film in Tsai's Taipei trilogy, *Vive L'amour*, presents the protagonist's growing queer desire through his attempt to put on a dress while imagining being caressed by another male protagonist in the bathroom.



A screen capture from *The River* shows the protagonist's father finding out that the young man who just had sex with him in the dark gay sauna room was his own son.

terms *tongzhi* and queer (sometimes interchangeably without clarification) in the study of Chinese-language media and cultural studies, Chao's remarks on the varying meanings and powerful alliance of the two terms are particularly useful.

Moreover, Chao emphasizes that the book is "anchored by four main themes or discourses: the Chinese familial system, Chinese opera and melodrama, camp aesthetics, and documentary film" (p. 301). In this sense, the book also makes the ambitious theoretical move of going beyond the relatively narrow scope of most scholarship on Chinese and Sinophone cinematic and literary portrayals of LGBTQ groups to explore how hetero-patriarchally structured familial values, media and cultural industries, and state policies have both constrained and implemented various queer "audio-visual elements" in these and other forms of media (p. 19).

More specifically, as a Taiwan-born, U.S.-trained Chinese-language film scholar, Chao has researched and taught in the field of cinema studies at various distinguished universities in the United States and Hong Kong for over a decade. His solid academic training in Anglophone queer media studies, his broad knowledge of the film industries and cultural histories of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and his sophisticated understanding of the transcultural LGBTQ world and politics are synthesized in stimulating ways in the book. His writing draws on key theoretical frameworks and concepts within Chinese and Sinophone queer film studies, such as Berry's (2000, 2001, 2004) influential discussions of the tension between homosexuality and the hetero-patrilineal family in Chinese-speaking societies and Martin's (2010) conceptualization of Chinese-language media representations of lesbian tomboyism. In addition, Chao carefully references relevant foundational Western gender, queer, and transgender scholarship, such as Judith Butler's (1990) and Eve K. Sedgwick's (1993) works on "performativity," Richard Dyer's (1979) and Alexander Doty's (1993) theorization of queer stardom and spectatorship, and Esther Newton's (1979) discussion of "camp." Chao explains his use of Western-originated queer theory "as a form of analysis that systematically challenges any theoretical or discursive practice which naturalizes sexuality" (p. 26). Suturing these with queer Chinese and Sinophone media studies, Chao produces fertile, novel syntheses for "lesser-studied titles, or ... more familiar titles from new perspectives" (p. 32).

Chao states his aim as, "locat[ing] the transmedial representations of *tongzhi*/queer subjects within the interactive and interdependent relations between the socio-economic and the cultural, the global and the regional, the regional and the local, and the local and the individual" (p. 17) He presents two chapters that address the relation between familial discourses and state politics in different ways in Section One, "Against Families, Against States."

Chapter 1, "The Chinese Queer Diasporic Imaginary," starts with a historical account of the intertwined discourses on the ideologies of Confucian filial piety (*xiao*), the familial home (*jia*), and the family-state (*jia-guo*)—all of which have been shaped in interesting ways by traditional Chinese values and various modern, political mentalities in Mainland China (those of the Chinese Communist Party) and Taiwan (those of the KMT government, aimed at

sustaining the legitimacy of the ROC). Chao pays particular attention to the father-son relationship in Taiwan's patrilineal social settings in his analyses of the 1986 Taiwanese gay film *Outcasts* (dir. Yu Kan-ping) and Tsai Mingliang's Taipei trilogy (including *Rebels of the Neon God* made in 1992, *Vive L'amour* made in 1994, and *The River* made in 1996). He argues that these films employ various male-homosexual tropes, such as the discourses on *niezi*, Nezha, AIDS, ghostliness, and local theater opera, in order to contest the Han-centric, heterosexual-structured "familial nationalism" in (post)colonial Taiwan (p. 63, p. 95).

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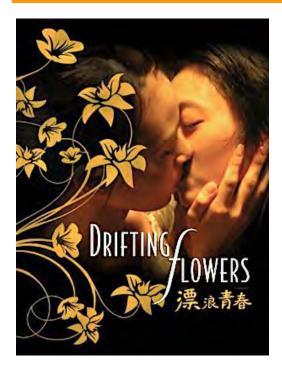
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JUMP CUT

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As the author points out, the narrative tropes of AIDS, tensions between *tongzhil*queer children and their natal families, and the settings of theater and opera have been commonly deployed in more recent Taiwan LGBTQ films. *Drifting Flowers* (dir. Zero Chou, 2008), in particular, contains three sections, each of which is a response to one of these tropes (p. 98). The author also discusses the use of "queer camp" in the Taiwanese director Zero Chou's work in Chapter 4.

In particular, Chao's analysis of *Outcasts* pays attention to the trope of "*niezī*" that represents a scenario in which "male homosexuals are banished from their familial homes, deprived of full entry to the public sphere, and ultimately exiled from the dominant family-state imaginary" (p. 65). Yet, by constantly incorporating in its storyline the tensions between the native Taiwanese and Taiwan's colonial traumas brought on by Japan and Mainland China, the film creates an alternative mediascape—"a Chinese queer diasporic imaginary" that "juxtaposes queer politics and Chinacentric nationalism, thereby foregrounding the relative significance of the peripheral politics of Taiwan and Hong Kong vis-à-vis Mainland China" (p. 39).

A similar *niezi* trope can also be found in *Rebels of the Neon God* through its symbolic comparison of the tale of the rebellious Taoist God, Nezha with the film protagonist's implicit homoeroticism and his tensions with his heterosexual natal family. In Chinese mythology, Nezha is imagined as a young boy born in a strict military family who had intense confrontations with his father and the social institutions. These eventually led to Nezha's suicide through which he returned his flesh and bones to his parents (in order to save them from being punished by another god). After his reincarnation, Nezha established his own autonomy and reconciled with his father. As Chao finds, this Chinese trope of Nezha "manifests the trajectory of a particular kind of Chinese male subjectivity—from rebelling against filiality to repaying one's filial liabilities before gaining one's autonomy" (p. 86). At the same time, this mythological figure also symbolizes both a "ghostly existence" and "homelessness" after his radical break from his kin relationships (p. 87). The use of cultural tropes of ghostliness and homelessness are also evident in the latter two films of Tsai's Taipei trilogy in which the subject's homosexual desire has become more prominent.

The book's second chapter, titled "Two Stage Sisters: Comrades, Almost a Love Story," presents a fresh queer reading of the political melodrama Two Stage Sisters (dir. Xie Jin, 1964) and the historical context of the film's production (Maoist/socialist China). The film narrates the experiences of two Chinese female Shaoxing opera performers who lived through the Sino-Japanese war, the Chinese Civil War, and the early socialist China era after the founding of the PRC (from 1935 to 1950). Socialist China has been known for its official patriarchal appropriation of women's gender, body, and sexuality to serve the interests of the nation-state in self-modernization. One of the most widely known cases is "socialist feminism" (also known as "socialist androgyny") that the PRC propagandized at the time, which encouraged a distorted sociocultural atmosphere that desexualized women's bodies and forced them to wear loose-fitting, plain-colored clothes similar to men's. Homosexuality, especially lesbian desire, was paradoxically rendered invisible (though also possibly encouraged in the name of socialist comradeship in same-sex groups) in this social-political environment. Chao's textual analysis of the film links the narrative to both the queer residues (e.g., all-female troupes and cross-dressing performances) and the political manipulation of Shaoxing opera in socialist China. He argues that these two apparently contradictory discourses of female same-sex intimacies and socialist, revolutionary politics and ideologies coexisted and were magically merged in the film to present an imaginary of alternative familial relationships between women in a highly politicized context.



The Mainland Chinese animation Ne Zha is adapted from the mythological story. In the original tale, Nezha killed Dragon King's son, Aobing. Yet, the animation presents an intriguing homosocial tension between Nezha and Aobing, starting from Nezha's rescue of Aobing from the water demon. Even though he experiences demonic urges, Nezha is portrayed as treating Aobing as his only friend and as willing to spare Aobing's life after Nezha defeats him. The film, which garnered global success, centers on the intense homosociality between the two and involves demonization, familial love and hatred, life and death, and salvation and reincarnation. The two animated figures also gained a huge global gueer fanbase after the film's release. The film's DVD cover, juxtaposing the two mythological figures face to face, connotes and dramatizes their homosociality



A screen capture from *Two Stage Sisters* shows that the two female performers (one in her cross-dressing Shaoxing opera costume) exhibit an intense emotional intimacy in their opera troupe

Section II, "Camp Aesthetics," features two chapters on local reconfigurations of Western-derived camp cultures in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chapter 3, "Mass Camp in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema," offers both a valuable historical record and a critical discussion of mass camp and its influences on the rise of gender parody in Hong Kong films since the 1970s. This has been an understudied topic in Chinese-language media and cultural studies. Chao understands mass camp as a mainstream discourse in Hong Kong that has been characterized by a "purging of its cultural 'stigma'" (p. 152). He believes that it often manifests itself in mainstream, commercial Hong Kong cinema as a combination of homophobic jokes and gender-norm-transgressing images, featuring "mockery, consumerism, and entertainment" (p. 173).

I find Chao's analysis of the role of dubbing in cinematic camp performances and appreciation in this chapter particularly strong and thought-provoking. Unlike most scholarly discussions of gender-bending in Hong Kong cinema and media that tend to focus on visual styles and aesthetics, Chao's analysis of classic cross-gender movie stars and characters, such as the self-castrated male martial artist, "Asia the Invincible," in the famous film *Swordsman II* (dirs. Ching Siu-tung and Stanley Tong, 1992), shows that the gendered nature of dubbing actively contributes to "the 'bifurcation' between sound and image" and perpetuates "an ironic relationship between viewers and texts" that encourages camp appreciation from audiences (p. 165, p. 179).

Chapter 4, "Toward an Aesthetic of Tongzhi Camp," discusses another form of camp—tongzhi camp—through a reading of three Taiwan films featuring camp expressions: Zero Chou's Corner's (2001) and Splendid Float (2004) and Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole* (1998). *Corner's* is a documentary that captures the precarious space of a gay bar in 21st century Taipei which has been consistently threatened by the predominantly heteronormative social environment. As Chao suggests, this "compressed tongzhi/queer living space" is represented as being filled with "negative [queer] feelings such as shame and melancholy" through the documentary's aural-visual deployment (p. 221). At the same time, the director's creative deploys aural elements, such as voiceover, diegetic music, and diverse languages and pitches used by the subjects in the documentary. This artistic manipulation of the soundtrack also bridges and contrasts these queer feelings in the dominant heteronormative world with the parodic drag performances (female impersonations) and the camp expressions and aesthetics of the performers in the bar (the marginalized tongzhi/queer space).

The feature-length drama Splendid Float narrates the story of a drag queen

after finding out that they are being signed by the same company. According to Chao's queer reading of the film's narrative-visual features, the troupe's costume case symbolizes a "closet" for the two "sisters." Both the cross-gender traditions of Shaoxing opera and the historical specificities of the socialist time (promoting androgyny and female bonding yet sustaining heteropatriarchal dictates) simultaneously enact and confine the queer tension between the two to a form of socialist sisterhood.



As Chao notes (p. 179), in the first two thirds of the film, Asia the Invincible has a male voice because he is still in the process of practicing the Sunflower Scripture and thus has yet to complete the transition to female. Here, the capture shows that his concubine says that his skin is getting smoother even though he is still in a man's body (with a low, male voice). This contrast between the feminine look of the actress Brigitte Lin who plays the role of Asia the Invincible and the dubbed male voice of the character contributes to the character's gender-bending imagery and thus encourages camp responses to it.



The drag queen troupe leader in *Splendid Float* is a Taoist priest in the daytime and performed the funeral rites for her late male lover.

troupe in Taiwan. Chao finds that the film presents female impersonations as both a survival strategy for queers to find "pleasure and solace ... in a heteronormative, hostile environment" and "a local aesthetic taking shape at the intersection of class and ethnicity" (p. 227). The unique camp aesthetics of the troupe are borne on its appropriation of local Taiwanese feminine culture and language in the impersonations, which shows that "*Tongzhi* culture is not foreign, but firmly ingrained in this island" (p. 230).

Different from Zero Chou's work and other abovementioned queer films by Tsai, *The Hole* is a seemingly heterosexual musical drama. Nevertheless, focusing on the film's "theatricality and aestheticism," as well as the "role-playing" feature of the acting, Chao's queer reading of the director's appropriation of musical genre reveals an uncomfortable mismatch between the film's musical numbers and its diegesis. Chao believes that these features create a camp sensibility in this "straight" musical similar to the *tongzhi* camp in *Splendid Float* (pp. 234–236). Ultimately, considering both forms of camp as performative discourses, Chao emphasizes that "while *tongzhi* camp and mass camp may share characteristics such as irony, theatricality and (sporadic) humor, *tongzhi* camp nonetheless differs from mass camp due to its agents' continuous negotiation of negative feelings" (p. 244). In other words, *tongzhi* camp "simultaneously affirms *tongzhi*/queer experience and subjectivity" (p. 197).

The last section, "Documentary Impulse," is relatively short, containing two chapters on the queer subjectivities and potential of Chinese documentary filmmaking. Chapter 5, "Coming Out of The Box, Lalas with DV Cameras," explores lesbian subjectivities in two Chinese lesbian documentaries shot in digital videos, The Box (dir. Ying Weiwei, 2001) and Dyke March (dirs. Shi Tou and Ming Ming, 2004). Chao probes a particularly urgent, crucial issue in Chinese-language LGBTQ studies, namely "the lack of public and scholarly accounts of lesbian subjects in China" (p. 250). While criticizing The Box for its director's "disengaged approach" to local Chinese lesbian subjects in a feminist documentary targeting non-tongzhi audiences (p. 260), Chao commends Dyke March for presenting "transcultural imagination and practice," raising local queer consciousness, and "enhancing [the] public visibility" of tongzhi communities (pp. 267-268). Chao terms these filmmakers "lalas with DV cameras [lala meaning queer women in the Chinese-speaking context who are [or who at least politically identify with] lesbians, who are highly aware of the varied experiences and issues associated with being a lala, and who express this political concern in their work" (p. 268). He also describes a recent trend in the development of lesbian documentary filmmaking in China that "emphasizes both collaboration and the specificity of a lesbian identity" (p. 247).

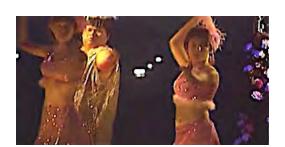


A screen capture from *Dyke March*. While *The Box*, the first lesbian documentary in Mainland China, mainly deploys an intersectional feminist (yet also uncomfortably "objective") lens and a



A screen capture from the documentary Lesbian Factory. Lesbian Factory and Rainbow Popcorn are a documentary couplet. They capture the journey of a group of Filipino female migrant workers realistic, observational approach with lengthy interviews, *Dyke March* exemplifies the lesbian-identified director Shi Tou's participatory method in documentary filmmaking. The capture shows Shi Tou presents a "different" queer scenario through a transcultural gaze for the *tongzhi* audience during the lesbian parade in San Francisco in which she marches with the crowd.

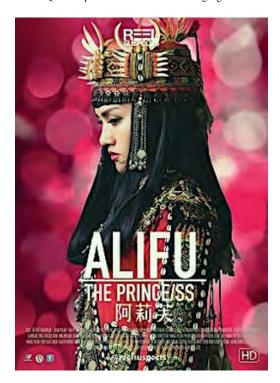
and activists who actively fought for the equal rights of migrant workers and searched ways to resolve their labor disputes in Taiwan. Meanwhile, they also document the development of the same-sex desire and relationships among the female migrant workers over the years. The documentaries' presentation of lesbianism, transnational social activism, unjust social and economic systems, and migration and homelessness are all relevant to Chao's major concept proposed in the book, "the Chinese queer diasporic imaginary."



As this capture from *Splendid Float* shows, the drag troupe's impersonations are characterized by local Taiwanese femininity and aesthetics (as well as local language). This feature, as Chao argues, demonstrates that both *tongzhi* and Taiwanese cultures are "marked by a same sense of diasporic sentiment" and closely associated with each other (p. 230).

Chapter 6, "Performing Gender, Performing Documentary in Postsocialist China," focuses on two DV documentaries about female impersonation in postsocialist China: Tang Tang (dir. Zhang Hanzi, 2004) and Mei Mei (dir. Gao Tian, 2005). Chao's analysis of the two films links the subjects' fanchuan (gender-role reversal) performances to local Chinese cross-dressing operatic traditions. By examining the distinctive aesthetic and generic styles of the documentaries, Chao shows that different from the ways in which Mei Mei presents its subject's life and experiences, Tang Tang's integration of fiction into documentary filmmaking and its reflexive style underlie the performative feature of both gender and the documentary genre. Chao's analyses of the two documentaries also reveal that the cross-dressing performers portrayed in the films are queer subjects in the making who have been constantly negotiating their performances and identities with contemporary China's gendered postsocialist and transcultural imaginaries.

The book concludes with a brief discussion of key ideas, major interventions, and promising directions for further research. In the conclusion, Chao once again raises the issue of rethinking the cinematic representations of queer subjects who are also considered geopolitical, linguistic, and ethnic minorities in Chinese-speaking societies through the concept of "a Chinese queer diasporic imaginary." Nevertheless, it might be a surprise to some readers that the book does not thoroughly examine some of the more recent films relevant to this topic, such as *Alifu: The Prince/ss* (dir. Wang Yu-ling, 2017), which features an indigenous Taiwanese transgender character, or the documentaries Lesbian Factory (dir. Susan Chen, 2010) and Rainbow Popcorn (dir. Susan Chen, 2013), which address Filipino lesbian migrant workers in Taiwan. Some further discussions on how this "Chinese queer diasporic imaginary" might be useful for understanding media portrayals of queer, ethnic-minority subjects physically located within and outside contemporary Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan would help to highlight the connections across LGBTQ communities globally and link this book to more recent queer diasporic and queer transnational studies of the Chinese and Sinophone worlds (see, for example, Bao, 2020; Shernuk, 2020). Similarly, while Chao's queer reading of the mythological figure, Nezha, is particularly interesting and persuasive, an investigation of the recent queerconnoted, transnationally successful Mainland Chinese animation film Ne Zha (dir. Jiaozi, 2019), which attracted a huge number of global queer fans online, would be particularly relevant but is also missing from the book.



The official poster for the recent Taiwan drama film *Alifu: The Prince/ss*. The film portrays the stories of an indigenous young man of Paiwan descent who has been struggling with his transgenderism and his identity as a member of an ethnic minority, a drag queer bar owner who is transsexual but terminally ill, and a straight-identified civil servant who performs in the bar's drag show. The gender, sexual, and ethnic minority cultures lodged together in the film are closely relevant to the discussions in Chao's book.

However, considering the scope and the length of the book, such omissions are understandable and should not keep this book from being regarded as a theoretically robust, well-written scholarly work that helps to redefine the field of contemporary Chinese-language queer cinema, media, and cultural studies.

Overall, *Queer Representations in Chinese-Language Film and the Cultural Landscape* is an innovative, much-needed contribution that breaks down the boundaries between Sinophone and Anglophone queer media studies and documents a rich array of queer texts and contexts spanning three major Chinese-speaking societies. It offers new perspectives for investigating both LGBTQ representations and queer sentiments, audio-visuality, connotations, and aesthetics of mainstream, even propagandistic, Chinese-language cinema and media. As one of only a few scholarly books that devotes a major section to Chinese-speaking lesbian media cultures, it serves as a powerful call for enhancing public and scholarly attention to queer women in the Sinosphere.

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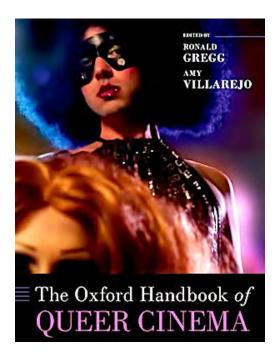
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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Wishful perceptions and archival fervor in queer cinema theory

review by Kevin John Bozelka

Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 864 pages, 220 film stills and illustrations, \$175.00 hardcover ISBN 9780190877996.

It might seem difficult to believe that one sentence could sum up a book as unwieldy as *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, an 864-page anthology of 31 essays edited by Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo. But indeed, such a sentence appears at the beginning of David Lugowski's essay "A Duet for Sailors and Pansies: Queer Archival Work and See Male Same-Sex Dancing in *Follow the Fleet* (1936) and Other Depression-Era Films" in which Lugowski discusses his methodology:

"My adding archival research to textual analysis, along with studying such areas as stardom, genre, authorship, performance, and reception, lends persuasive historical heft and context to what might otherwise seem a queer critic's wishful perceptions" (187).

The labor of the queer cinema scholar involves a constant guard against claims of reading too fancifully, i.e., too queerly. We must marshal hard evidence to persuade often disinterested if not flat-out phobic minds that we did (and do) exist, that what we are seeing and hearing is actually there. Most of the authors in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, then, pursue archival research with a fervor meant to ward off any attempts to erase our existence, rendering the tome an indispensable model of queer scholarship.

Lugowski, for instance, visited the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences library and analyzed documents from the Studio Relations Committee (SRC) and the Production Code Administration (PCA), two regulatory bodies within the classical Hollywood system to ensure that films conformed to a code of moral guidelines. He discovered that the censors employed by these bodies regularly mandated the elimination of "pansy humor" and any reference to "sex perversion." Even the U.S. Navy, which assisted in the production of *Follow the Fleet* (Mark Sandrich, 1936), requested the removal of a scene in which Fred Astaire teaches a group of sailors how to dance.



Possible "sex perversion" in Follow the Fleet (Mark Sandrich, 1936).

That the scene remained, albeit with a less queer bent, demonstrates the centrality of queerness not only to mainstream cinema but to eras in which queerness supposedly did not exist. As Lugowski notes,

"I want to emphasize that the nature of my intervention is to read the texts at hand—the film, the scripts, the PCA files—in conjunction with each other, treating the issue of queerness not simply as one of my reception but also as the historical production of discourse" (208).

Several of the authors included in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, however, contend that their acts of queer perception, no matter how "simple" or "wishful" others may claim them to be, are appropriate scholarly endeavors and feel no need to back up their assertions with archival research. In "Lesbian Cinephilia and Digital Affordances," Patricia White discusses how digital remixing of sounds and images moves beyond the reflectionist perspective of queer presence in media. She reveals how, for instance, the video essay work of Catherine Grant "engage[s] deeply with representation as an aesthetic process, more complex than a character standing in for a social group" (81) and how fans use the GIF format to "resis[t] resolution...a perfect emblem of the fetish, forever oscillating between desire and prohibition" (87). In these instances, lesbian cinephilia is not simply a matter of identifying and celebrating openly gay characters but rather, an act of imagination to locate lesbianism at all points throughout cinema history.



Ne Me Quitte Pas (Catherine Grant, 2015) engages deeply with representation as an aesthetic process.

In "Arias for an Untold Want: The Queer Desire of the Diva Film," Dolores McElroy links together films as disparate as *Rapsodia Satanica* (Nino Oxilia, 1917), *Funny Girl* (William Wyler, 1968), and *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) to posit that they share a queer structure of desire. Even though the female protagonists of each title are heterosexual, their greatest love is for themselves, i.e., for another woman. Through a mise-en-scène of mirrored doubles or an extended sequence of solitary reverie, the characters break free from heterosexual strictures and bask in a queer narcissism which "can be a tool, a layer of fat against the long, patriarchal winter" (128). And in "Mirror Scene: Transgender Aesthetics in *The Matrix* and *Boys Don't Cry*," Cael M. Keegan takes up this thread on mirrored doubles to insist that transgender aesthetics play just as much of a central role in *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999), a film with no overtly trans characters, as they do in *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999), a biopic about trans man Brandon Teena, indeed the film that marked a new era in transgender topicality for mainstream cinema. As Keegan avers, trans functions not

"an object of inquiry, but as a praxis of revelation and recovery in response to structures that produce imperceptibility" (495).

But whether conveying archival fervor or wishful perceptions, *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema* is an urgent, even moving act of queer witnessing, Lugowski's fantastic essay most definitely included. Each of its eight sections serves as witness to the boundless vibrancy of queer cinema. In "Queerly, Hopelessly, Precariously: Reimagining a Queer Politics of Globalization Through Three Taiwan Films," Hwa-Jen Tsai critiques fashionable queer theories of precarity and negativity to reveal how the precarious situation of migrant workers in three Taiwanese films, *Lesbian Factory* (Su-Hsiang Chen, 2010), *Rainbow Popcorn* (Su-Hsiang Chen, 2013), and *Thanatos, Drunk* (Tso-chi Chang, 2015), creates new, unforeseen forms of queer intimacy. Against recent theories espoused by Ann Cvetovich, Lee Edelman, and Judith Butler, Tsai is

"interested in seeing precarity and negativity not as ontological differences that often lead to a politics of inclusion and exclusion and, therefore, identity politics, but as potential points of connection that can generate new forms of queer relationality" (700-701).

In "Excessive Attachments: 21st Century Queer and Trans Video Art in the United States," William J. Simmons provides a head-spinning account of trans and queer





Breaking free from heterosexual strictures in *Rapsodia Satanica* (Nino Oxilia, 1917) and *Funny Girl* (1968).



Mirrored doubles and transgender aesthetics in *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999).



Lesbian Factory (Su-Hsiang Chen, 2010) shows how precarity and negativity in the lives of migrant workers can instigate new forms of queer relationality.



Documentaries like *Queercore: How to Punk a Revolution* (Yony Leyser, 2017) have honored the queercore movement's punk spirit and resisted its cooptation.

video art and installations in the 21st century from such artists as Mariah Garnett, Zackary Drucker, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Stanya Khan. What unties the disparate works by these artists is how much they position explorations of the self against normative notions of identity. Simmons suggests a necessarily multivalent critical approach to the analysis of their artwork:

"If queer and trans art always require a relationship to what is normative, there may be some nostalgia for art that only speaks for itself and requires nothing of the critic or historian other than formalist interpretation...there may be a desire to return to a pure historicism, to allow art to become discursive happenstance that illustrates social and political argumentation...We may never be able to find the happy medium among these strategies, so queer and trans video art requires some of each and, at certain times, all of them" (803).

Curran Nault traces the history of queercore cinema in "Making a Scene: Queercore Cinema." He details a preposterous 2017 Gucci ad which hawked a Queercore Collection of overpriced garments. Against this attempt to siphon the revolutionary energy of early queercore artists such as G. B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce, a slate of documentaries have honored the movement's punk spirit and resisted its cooptation. Nault analyzes how the frenzied pace of such documentaries as *Queercore: A Punk-u-mentary* (Scott Treleaven, 1996), *She's Real Worse Than Queer* (Lucy Thane, 1997), *Rise Above: The Tribe 8 Documentary* (Tracy Flannigan, 2004), *Queercore: How to Punk a Revolution* (Yony Leyser, 2017), and *ART Heart: Children of Riot Grrrl and Queercore* (Celeste Chan and Eliat Graney-Saucke, 2018)

"conserv[e] the subculture's visual and aural representations from the time the subculture was at its creative peak" (562).

In "Representing Ourselves into Existence: The Cultural, Political, and Aesthetic Work of Transgender Film Festivals in 1990s," Laura Horak examines the difficulties of sustaining transgender film festivals, particularly their often tense relationships with larger gay and lesbian festivals. In order to embark on such a project, Horak used the following questions to guide her research:

"Why was this festival founded? What was its relationship to the local lesbian and gay film festival? What was shown at the festival and what were the programming criteria? Where did the funding come from? How did festival organizers imagine the 'transgender' community? What effect did the festival have on the local lesbian and gay film festival? What factors contributed to the festival's longevity or transience?" (513).

She concludes that

"in the late 1990s, these festivals helped define a specifically transgender identity and community that overlapped with but were not coextensive with 'queer'" (512).

And in "VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and 'Queer Cinema,'" Alexandra Juhasz reports on her VHS Archives seminar at Brooklyn College in which students not only interact with but also create new connections with her archive of 200 VHS tapes concerning queer activism. As Juhasz explains,

"[t]he primary goal was activating queer archives in useful ways, not simply digitizing tapes and plopping them on some cul-de-sac on the Web but using them, in community, to make new and linked things, feelings, and ideas" (633-634).



Lindsay Anderson sent a small check to help fund *Nighthawks* (Ron Peck, 1978).

Students engaged in performance art, protests, remixing, and a night of burlesque in tandem with the archive. Juhasz sees this practice as part of $\frac{1}{2}$

"the harder, less visible, and as or more resource-dependent work of saving, seeing, and using what we made before. Then there's this work: reading (and writing) all that is not being read, and doing this as queerly as we must" (637).

Several essays steer clear of the typical academic article format to offer more personal reflections on a life in queer cinema. Thomas Waugh conceives of his tenure as a teacher, editor, and writer as a fruitful form of queer pedagogy, one threatened today by impoverished and panicky conceptions of teacher/student interactions. As Waugh contends,

"alongside the radical upheaval of #MeToo, the current turbulence, intensified as it is by litigation, polarization, misunderstanding, and scapegoating, dictates increasingly that this kind of rich intimacy is suspect, indistinguishable from exploitation to the policing bureaucracies, media, and courts" (18).

But Waugh sees his chapter as one that

"urges queer film studies to maintain its sometimes underrecognized legacy of work that is author-driven, personal, and essayistic and engaged with everyday life and political environments, and a canon that strides the spectrum between R. W. Fassbinder and Colby Keller" (16).

In "'A Panorama of Gay Life': *Nighthawks* and British Queer Cinema in the 1970s," Glyn Davis offers a history on the making of *Nighthawks* (Ron Peck, 1978) that bursts with fascinating factoids, especially concerning the travails of funding



Passing Strangers (Arthur J. Bressan, 1974) blends the explicitly homosexual with heart and passion.



Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016) evades pressures to divulge secrets and label desires.



Bobby Breen, a boy soprano whose success in Hollywood elicited homophobic reactions in the press.

the film:

- Lindsay Anderson sent a small check;
- Chantal Akerman suggested that Peck contact Karl Lagerfeld for funding;
- contributor Richard Dyer was once considered for the lead;
- John Schlesinger hosted a fundraising dinner and invited Elton John, David Hockney, and other wealthy gays; etc.

And Jenni Olson's meditation on her "Thirty Years in the Queer Film Ecosystem," as a festival organizer, critic, filmmaker, and preservationist, is so fun and passionate that it reads like a coffee klatch with a fellow film geek, offering ever more fascinating factoids: while working on preserving the films of Arthur J. Bressan, Jr., Olson found a letter from Frank Capra to Bressan about the latter's 1974 film *Passing Strangers* which warns

"don't be surprised if audiences as well as critics are baffled by the blend of 'explicitly homosexual' and 'heart and passion'" (604).

There are more riches in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema* than one book review can unearth. In "More than Meets the Eye: On Facing without Fully Knowing the Queer Worlds around Us," Nick Davis expounds on the usefulness of reticence and withholding in three gay films that critics have slotted as middlebrow: Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night* (2016), Anahita Ghazvinizadeh's *They* (2017), and Händl Klaus's *Tomcat* (2016). While these titles avoid the explicit sexuality, revolutionary tenor, and challenging form of more radical queer cinema, they nevertheless "refract attention towards social questions and axes of power" (48). Davis elucidates the operations of these three lesser-known films by linking them to his reception of Barry Jenkins's Oscar-winning *Moonlight* (2016):

"Watching *Moonlight* elucidate Chiron's experience for two hours while evading pressures on all sides to divulge secrets, label desires, or privilege my curiosity over his introversion gives me the same pleasure as a gymnast's sustained equipoise on the balance beam or an operatic leitmotif that never resolves" (45-46).

Allison McCracken's "There's a Rainbow on the River': The Affordances of Boy Soprano Bobby Breen in 1930s Hollywood" concerns the phobic reception of 1930s Hollywood boy soprano Bobby Breen. By the 1930s, the boy soprano (along with the higher-voiced crooners popular with female audiences) was being displaced by more "authentic" voices that were heard as expressing the true inner self of the singer, a trope that would later find its apex in rock music. The boy soprano was also associated with Irish, Italian, and Jewish ethnicities, groups that some commentators perceived as not having properly assimilated as Americans. Nevertheless, Breen's films were quite popular with precisely these devalued audiences. McCracken analyzes these films as well as the discourse surrounding them

"to closely examine the affordances of Breen's boy soprano voice: not only how it enabled particular queer vocalities, but also the way in which those vocalities in turn enabled sentimental narratives that privileged the cultural feminine, provided white working-class and gender variant representations, and resulted in professional opportunities for marginalized creative talent" (160).

In "*Teorema*'s Death Drive," Damon Young analyzes Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 masterpiece in order to uncover what this seemingly intractable film has to say



Homosexual desire as death drive in *Teorema* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1968).



Marin County's Druid Heights area in *The Bed* (James Broughton, 1968).

about, and offer to, queerness. Young reads the film not as an expression of queer identity but rather, as a springboard for creating new identities and relationships:

"Here, in 1968, we have a first cinematic inscription of homosexual desire as death drive—not in the sense of a murderous narcissism or a criminal pathology, not as any psychological attribute, but rather in the precise sense Lacan gave that phrase when he described it as creation ex nihilo, from scratch, 'a will to create from zero, a will to begin again.'" (352).

For "Greener Pastures: Filming Sex and Place at Druid Heights," Greg Youmans outlines the varied use of Marin County's Druid Heights area in queer and non-queer cinema: *The Bed* (James Broughton, 1967), *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (Mariposa Film Group, 1977), and the heterosexual pornographic film *Skintight* (Ed De Priest , 1981). Youmans notes that in 2018, the California State Historic Preservation Office announced that Druid Heights was eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Central to Youmans' argument, however, is a consideration of what kinds of histories such a designation will preserve including any of the representations of Druid Heights in the films above. His ultimate goal, then, is

"to show how the cinematic archive has a perhaps unique ability to hold historical contradictions in montage—contradictions that are otherwise vulnerable to being separated out into layers of sediment that are then buried and paved over by the official account of what happened" (384-385).

But the most redolent essay in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema* is Marc Francis' "For Shame!: On the History of Programming Queer 'Bad Objects'" for how it epitomizes both the historical and the fanciful strains of the anthology. In this superb article which fuses archival fervor with wishful perceptions, Francis analyzes film programming as an act of reparative historicizing:

"Within this methodology, the historian forges a relationship to the past that does not presuppose loss, deficiency, and pain but is rather one of openness to various positions that one can have to the past" (409)

By spreading out titles across a repertory theatre's calendar (Francis examines the November-December 1978 calendar of San Francisco's Roxie Cinema. Click here to see program.), programmers place films in conversation with one another and with various audiences to reveal the polysemy of queer cinema—an ecosystem greeted with shame, rage, and paranoia, to be sure, but also pleasure, joy, and the drive to forge new relationships and experiences. In the face of perpetual attempts to ward off our existence, Francis' essay and *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema* overall is a testament to the fact that queerness was, is, and will always central to cinema.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA







Laura Mulvey used Hitchcock films such as Vertigo (1958), Marnie (1964), Rear Window (1954) (from top to bottom) to exemplify the male gaze.



Get Out (Jordan Peele 2017)

Swiss Army Man and the prosthetic transgender gaze

by Joshua Bastian Cole

"There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure."—Laura Mulvey

I was recently asked by a more senior scholar if "gaze theory" is still a thing. The question was prompted by the fact that Laura Mulvey's foundational 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," a standard text in any Film Studies 101 class, has in the half-century since its first printing, been frequently rehearsed and heavily critiqued. What Mulvey termed "the male gaze" considered how general movie watchers pleasurably (or masochistically) identify with the bodies of actors they see on screen. In her psychoanalytic reading, male and female positions are reinscribed in relation to sexual difference: the active subject gazing is male, the camera's point of view belongs to him, further empowering him, while women become not only object, but explicitly erotic object. Mulvey claims women only exist on film to be objectified in a state she describes as "to-be-looked-at-ness" (837). [open endnotes and bibliography in new page] The analysis, limited to presumed white cisheterosexuality, has since been expanded to include more subjective gazes, deconstructing the concept of a universal viewership in which there can only be one monolithic gaze.

There are many forms of looking relations, and visual media has the ability to illustrate, while it enables, myriad ways of looking. Representational technologies like film can textually (in narrative and technical formalism) construct and convey affect both inside and outside the diegesis. This affect, however, is not always the intended one, as the mere existence of certain subjective viewing positions may not be anticipated by a film's producers. So, a camera's gaze does not necessarily correspond exactly with what a critical viewer (especially a viewer with a different position than the producer) sees.

Gaze scholarship is still relevant as it's concerned with how dominant mediated forms still work to control/contain bodies that become legible when otherwise absent from the visual field. Ultimately, gaze in critical theory refers to the reflexive acts of seeing and being seen. As viewers, we "look at, identify with, and are constructed by visual representations," and "desire, identity, and identification" are central to the mechanics of mediation (White "Gaze" 75). The 1990s took the most dramatic leaps toward distinguishing diverse and marginalized viewing positions. For instance, bell hooks' "oppositional gaze" reads against violent misrepresentations in which Black women have no narrative agency or utterly lack representation. Identifying with neither the Mulveyian phallocentric gaze nor the construction of white womanhood as, in Mary Ann Doane's articulation, "the supreme arbiter of lack," looking relations for Black women generate cinematic visual delight in an alternative, interrogatory way (hooks 126).



Hidden Figures (Theodore Melfi 2017)

bell hooks' oppositional gaze has been interpreted into recent Black cinematic images, in films such as *Get Out*, though the mechanism is an interrogative act operated by a critical viewer.

Chris Straayer offered similarly resistant cinematic readings with "temporary transvestite films" that depict a commonly occurring fantasy in which gender constructions are overthrown, safely and only provisionally, without challenging sexual difference. These films "unleash multiple identificatory processes that engage desires, which, within the dominant order, might seem to be in mutual conflict" (43). Straayer suggests that the "expansive pleasures" of these films depend on "a shared 'sneaking in' process" destabilizing boundaries between body, sex, and desire (78). Temporary transvestite films, however, still center a queer/straight sexuality dyad, and do not allow space for transness to "sneak in" gendered meaning not necessarily attached to sexuality.

Straayer's mechanism requires dialectical reading against the grain as both queer and straight readings have to be interpreted by the queer or straight viewer, both of whom "sneak" meaning in. Also in the 1990s, Patricia White described how heterosexist Hollywood makes the lesbian subject uncontainable within a film's framing. Existing in the space of illegibility and coming into coherence via the viewer's constructive imaginary, the affect attached to these kinds of reading practices serve as a basis for identification ("Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter" 142-144, *UnInvited* xiv).





Chris Straayer uses many examples to demonstrate "temporary transvestite films," such as *Charley's Aunt* (Archie Mayo 1941) (left) and *Victor Victoria* (Blake Edwards 1982) (right).





Patricia White examines *The Haunting* (Robert Wise 1963) (right and left) to see lesbian specters.



Breaking into the 2000s, and breaking away from spectatorship as bound to sexuality, Jack Halberstam considered the ways a "transgender look" is possible within a cinematic gaze. Through formal technique, cisnormative viewers access a trans gaze provisionally, like Straayer suggested, or with what Cáel M. Keegan later referred to as "prosthetic transgender gaze" ("Revisitation" 29). Halberstam's "trans look" replaces male and female gazes with modes of seeing in which the non-trans viewer looks *with* instead of *at* a trans character (86-88). Hollywood's compulsory cisheterosexuality, however, makes such a look brief and ultimately unsustainable. While integral to future scholarship on trans cinematic

Jack Halberstam uses this moment in *Boys Don't Cry* to identify a "trans look."



America's Dairy Farmers and the National Dairy Board, "Milk: It Does a Body Good" (1992). A boy and an adult man look at each other while Cáel M. Keegan, a trans viewer, makes this advertisement a trans object through his point of reception.

aesthetics, especially because it has to do with trans characters and creators, Halberstam's trans look specifically applies to a trans subject within the frame—a trans body to-be-looked-at.

By the 2010s and into the 20s, Keegan examines Halberstamian looking to expand upon trans points of media reception. Through reception, trans media objects can be formed unintentionally; media can accidentally support transgender embodied possibilities. Rather than focusing on the provisional trans look for cis spectators, Keegan instead names how such texts altogether deny the existence of trans people as image consumers. Indeed, outside of designed interpellation, texts produce meaning outside of producers' control ("Revisitation" 29, 32). Keegan also finds ways in which intentionally trans texts that have been critiqued as negative (films that stereotype or fetishize transgender embodiment), can be radically illustrative. However unexpectedly, "bad" trans films perhaps portray transness better than those aiming for "good" representation ("Bad Trans Objects" 29).

Trans reception, though, is not limited to intentionally trans texts. Media that neither includes trans figures nor plans for a trans viewer can accidentally produce transness. Like Keegan's argument that a bad trans object is actually doing trans representation better, I suggest non-trans media also gets to transness more deeply, especially when it's not trying to. This authenticity is made legible, transness is made visible, through the point of reception—a different trans look, one that is not looking at a trans image at all, but is actively transforming a non-trans image. This mechanism does not even require contortion because sometimes, images on screen are so overtly trans, the absence of intention signals only that trans people, especially trans men, are off the radar.







It's Pat (Adam Bernstein 1994)

Keegan finds the value in "bad trans objects" such as serial killer Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) and comedically androgynous Pat (Julia Sweeney).

For White, uninvited meanings reside within unfamiliar recognition; these are the unauthorized reading practices of invisible guests (*UnInvited* xxiv). Trans men, especially, haunt Hollywood, sharing the ghostly presence. Keegan takes up this premise, claiming visual images not designed for us can nonetheless be perceived as trans narrative aesthetics and can even more directly address our subjective experience ("Bad Trans Objects" 34). Looking through a trans aesthetic, a media text can be a "trans object" that offers "a surface [for] becoming" ("Revisitation" 32). As we map ourselves into the media's narrative, we are the unintended, uninvited viewers who shift the story with new meaning, or what White describes as "oblique angles of desire" (xxiii). Trans relations to time and space are rich sites for fantasies of futurity and anachronism, according to Halberstam (15-17). The case study of this essay will approach an anachronistic fantasy, in which a dead body returns to life, as a rich site for a trans body to appear. The apparent trans

body is not only mine as the viewer, but the accidentally trans body on screen, made so by my identificatory, interrogatory, and powerfully trans look.

The trans look/crotch-gazing





Finnish artist, Tom of Finland, illustrated a hyper-stylized gay cruising culture

"Bulges are the new boobs."—Tara Block

Crotch-gazing is a well-known cultural experience, certainly for gay men cruising (Tom of Finland illustrated this overtly), but also for trans and disabled people, wheelchair users, for instance, whose eyelines are often at crotch-level[1] Wider culture has begun to recognize this practice as a gaze but presents it as something directed at cis straight women, though to them, "these images may feel illicit" (Duberman). Often comedic in tone, crotch shots are often largely considered a straight women's concern. For example, *Saturday Night Live*'s "Dongs All Over the World" parodic music video suggested "dongs" are "every woman's fantasy." College Humor has a similarly toned skit, "HBO Should Show Dongs," with a conscientious plea from "us, your female viewers" advocating for an equivocal depiction of male anatomy in correspondence to the many female nudes on-screen.[2]

Critics wonder if images of male groins subvert the "male gaze," which presumes not only a male viewer, but specifically a straight, cisgender, white, non-disabled male gazing with a distinct and unavoidably violating, non-consensually sexualized look at a female as, and *only* as, a sex object. A feminist perspective maintains that objectification is the exclusive domain of masculinity, however; "a direct inversion of the male gaze is neither possible nor desirable" (Duberman). My argument, though, is that the crotch gaze *remains* a male gaze, and specifically, a trans male gaze. And so, the look does not invert male gaze to a female gaze, but rather turns the male gaze into female-to-male gaze; it is a trans look.

Though the crotch shot is not a typical cinematic gaze, the concept of guiding a look to the male genital region is becoming actively mediated, particularly through prosthetic enhancement, as critics such as Peter Lehman have noted. It is also not a new shot. Carefully constructed moments in films such as Paul Thomas





Saturday Night Live, "Dongs All Over the World": In a parodic music video, SNL jokes that women fantasize about seeking out and "conquering" male genitalia



In the final moments of *Boogie Nights*, Dirk Diggler finally reveals the prosthetic "hero" penis worn by actor Mark Wahlberg. He says, "I am a big, bright, shining star," as he pulls it out and looks at it in the mirror, giving the audience our first glimpse. Although prosthetic, the scene is frequently censored.



Ozon's film *Swimming Pool* includes a slow pan down actor Jean-Marie Lamour's body, and when the camera pans back up, Lamour is erect.

Anderson's 1997 *Boogie Nights*, François Ozon's 2003 *Swimming Pool*, or Jason Reitman's 2007 *Juno* put male genitals in close-up, center frame. When *Juno*'s title character watches the track team run by, emphasized in slow motion, the runners' packages exaggeratedly bounce. Part of the effect is the camera speed, but the runners are also packing extra material. Screenwriter Diablo Cody explains, "there were prosthetic balls on a few of those guys, and the guys who got to wear them felt really superior." Reitman even directed them to "really kick up their knees to get those balls bouncing, too" (Audio Commentary).

The slo-mo bouncing balls fill the frame, but not until after carefully setting up the shot as referencing Juno's gaze, even though the angle is not one-to-one. Juno looks from behind the runners while they face the camera's lens. According to Reitman, the production team "spent a while, actually, setting up the perfect angle to see [them bouncing]." It is not a coincidence in my eyes (my trans man gaze), that the shot reflects Juno's gaze, performed by a not-yet-out Elliot Page who says,

"when I see them all running like that, with their things bouncing around in their shorts, I always picture them naked, even if I don't want to. All I see is pork swords."

As one trans man, Mark van Streefkerk, describes a similarly non-sexual trans look, one "just out of curiosity":

"There are all kinds of reasons to look. Admittedly, I'm low-key obsessed with what my dick would look like if I had been born cis. It's a source of frustrating dysphoria for me because there's no way I can ever know. If I catch a glance at a naked guy in the locker room it's probably because my mind constantly wonders, 'would it look like that'?"

The look is not necessarily a desiring gaze informed by sexuality; it's a trans man's gaze desiring visual similitude and the experience of things bouncing around in our shorts.









In Jason Reitman's *Juno*, as the runners come into frame, Elliot Page is in focus, gazing. The camera then pulls focus to the track team running by in slow motion, filling the frame, with Juno's seated point of view—the bouncing, prostheticized crotches at eye level.



Reelmagik, LLC is a prosthetic designer that creates professional special effect make-up pieces as well as prosthetics for trans people. Their product marketing juxtaposes trans men's packers with recreations of famous SF cinema make-up like *The Terminator* (James Cameron



To say so sounds flippant, reductive, and maybe ridiculous, but trans masculine gender euphoria is frequently achieved by packing: the placement and wearing of an object (generally a specially designed prosthetic), to indicate the presence of cis-typical male genitalia. This practice has a long history, and in recent years it has generated a booming international industry for synthetic penises as well as various apparatuses for harnessing that are both practical and aesthetic. Aesthetics have become important to packer and packing accessory design, as there is also an autoscopy that, similarly non-sexual, is self-affirming:

"I stepped into my first pair of packing underwear, slipped my packer into his pouch, and I examined myself in the mirror. The maroon boxer briefs rested tightly, but securely, on my thighs. The white waistband had a complimenting thickness about it, and the bulge — the bulge sat prominently, but not arrogantly, between my legs. In that reflection, there was something within me that clicked. A wave a relief seemed to come over me, releasing buried tensions I didn't even know I had.

"That looks like me," I thought to myself." (Thomas Cole)

As we look to others and examine ourselves, for comparison as well as complicated desires, there is a certain attentive care to the shape of a bulge. Packing can reverse dissociative dysphoric trauma and re-connect us, via the prosthetic object, to our bodies and to the world. As such, a packer does not stand alone, but creates an embodied consciousness, a critical, subjective way of looking and interpreting. It is not just a feeling; in fact, often there is no nervous feeling because a packer is not biologically attached. So, the visual field is all the more important as the addition creates a new image.

While Vivian Sobchack and other prosthetics scholars such as C.D. Murray, Marquard Smith, and Joanne Morra stress the physical interactivity of prostheses

1984) and Frankenstein (James Whale 1931).



Transstore Packers, a Brazilian online retailer with a wide range of products for trans men, including packers, packing harnesses and underwear, binders and binding tape, and packer inserts.

in general, packers do something more specialized than an arm or a leg. Packers are expected to do more than fill out a shape, and each design generally highlights one of four functional elements, known as the 4 P's (pack, pee, play, pleasure), but very few singular packers function equally well in all areas. A packer creates the bulge shape authentically, can be used to urinate while standing,[3] can have penetrative sex, or actually feel good and stimulate the wearer. Packer use is always already meaningful because of its cultural connections to genitality, and as Sandy Stone has said, a prosthesis can extend the will "across the boundaries of flesh and machinery" ("Transsubjectivity" 127). Our will extends the boundaries of visual media, as well. Like we do with our packers, we make things work for us. And because we do a lot of looking, at ourselves and at other men, we can recognize the crotch gaze when depicted on screen as a spectacle for, and a spectatorship practice among, trans men.[4]



Transguy Supply is a preeminent online retailer that started out selling packing underwear, but has expanded their product line, which now includes packers.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Ria Brodell's *Butch Heroes* catalogs the life of Anastasius Lagrantinus Rosenstengel who was executed in the 16th century for "sodomy." His trial evidenced his stuffed leather penis with two stuffed testicles made from pig's bladder. This illustration is In the collection of the Davis Museum at Wellesley College.

Reinventing the packer

"When we were shooting it, I kept thinking, 'this is exactly like seeing the dinosaur in Jurassic Park or seeing the shark in Jaws or seeing E.T. for the first time."—Paul Thomas Anderson[5][open endnotes and bibliography in new page]

In the mid-90s, with the understanding of identification as a narrative practice, Judith Roof wrote that queer presence in film is synechdochal for perversity. Even with validated queer characters, there remains for the queer viewer something "slightly alienating if not definitely wrong" (xxvi-xxvi). While my project here expressly selects non-trans material, I not only interpret it as allegorical for trans men and identify cinematic formalism that can expand the definition of trans cinema, but also highlight our gap in the archive. We have fallen out of the realm of possibility so much that producers sometimes craft us into being without trying to. One of the most visible ways we are invisible is in the cinematic production of prosthetic penises, as if this has not indeed been a cultural praxis of ours for centuries. [6] Of course, on-screen prosthetic penises are not for us, but for cisgender male actors.

For the 2016 film, Swiss Army Man, co-writer/director Daniel Scheinert states,

"We wanted [Dan] Radcliffe's wiener to move in real time. We literally built an animatronic wiener. You'd move a joystick, and it would go exactly where the joystick went" ("Behind the Scenes").

Not only did this animatronic mimic the vertebrae design of many contemporary packers that can become erect, but the repeated phrasing describing the use of a mechanical "joystick" to puppeteer Radcliffe's erection accidentally alludes to a well-known item for many in the trans men's community: a product called the "Joystick," designed by trans owned and operated prosthetics company Transthetics. Emphasizing how "new" this was for the film's production team, Makeup Effects Producer Jason Hamer and cinematographer Larkin Seiple both proudly claimed they were doing "things that have never been done before" ("Making Manny," "Behind the Scenes").



Swiss Army Man co-director Daniel Kwan manipulates the film's robotic penis with a joystick.



A popular product designed by and for trans men: the Transthetics "Joystick."

Another makeup effects artist, Matthew Mungle is "the go-to man when filmmakers need a prosthetic penis" (Kutner). Apparently, that need is quite



Actor Glenn Close has prosthetic ears applied by the make-up department to masculinize her face, even though in reality, trans men actually use prosthetics on other parts of our bodies.



723 likes

freetompros Medical Prosthetics have been created around the world for many years. Ears, noses, eyes and so on. Every person deserves the best Medical Prosthetics for ANY PART OF THEIR body (**). We just happen to make Medical Prosthetics (like the one you see here) for Transgender people, cis men with Erectile dysfunction, micro penis, phalloplasty and many more Medically diagnoses.

Freetom Medical Prosthetics is a trans owned company, advocating in this ad with their recreated ear that packers are like any other prosthetic. Mungle might have made use of information like this had he even looked.

often, as Mungle works in Hollywood consistently. Oddly, when tasked with a film that actually centered trans masculine life, *Albert Nobbs* (Rodrigo Garcia 2011), Mungle took a wide, weird turn. If you google the plot summary, the film's description does all the work Roof describes, alienating a trans reader, getting everything wrong: "He is really a she [...] secretly a woman."[7] But regardless of narrative, Mungle's work, as an effects artist, is visual. His choices for actor Glenn Close in the role of Nobbs did something bizarre in such a way that indeed signals something "definitely wrong." Describing the design, Mungle elaborates the choice to masculinize Close by way of facial prosthetics:

"[Close] was wearing a prosthetic nose [and] gelatin earlobes [...] giving her a slightly wider ear and a longer ear which made her ears look more masculine. She also had ear plumpers behind her ears to push her ears out which gave her a more endearing look." ("Makeup Commentary")

For Mungle, ears, apparently, make the man.

The film certainly ensures a full reveal of a trans man's exposed breasts, as is typical for trans men "representation" in film, for instance, Brandon Teena's notorious unbinding scene in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). To fulfil the trope, breasts must be seen for cisgender obsessive gratification, proving without a (cis) doubt the assigned bodies beneath the supposed masquerade. Talia Mae Bettcher examines this perceived "deception," stating it is founded by a concept of "reality enforcement," whereby so-called "real" sex and/or gender is thought to be empirically verifiable (383). Although the two trans masculine characters of *Albert Nobbs*, the title character and his friend Hubert (Janet McTeer), both wear prosthetics all over their faces, Hubert's revealed breasts are *au naturale*. In contrast, as Lehman has critiqued, prosthetic penises worn by cis men are quite frequently seen now on screen, and they all have one thing in common: they're big.

The epitome of big prosthetic penises appears in Anderson's *Boogie Nights*, which climactically ends with the much-discussed "hero" penis (made for the now famous close-up shot), inspired by 1970s porn star John Holmes. For the role of Dirk Diggler, Mark Wahlberg wore a large prosthetic penis over his own, a practical effect the production designers spent weeks building. *Boogie Nights'* Special Makeup Effects Supervisor, Howard Berger, describes their process:

"We sculpted a version that was 12 inches long, and we tested it and it was just way too big. It looked just like a weird monster penis. The next one was seven inches; that was the penis we went with. One of our artists, Garrett Immel, sculpted this penis to be slightly erect and with the testicles and everything. [...] That was the final thing. We spent two weeks making the penises." (qtd. in French and Kahn)

The process of casting, molding, and sculpting for accurate anatomical detail was not unlike the one employed by Marlene Hoeber, in the same time period, for silicone sex toy manufacturer Vixen Creations. Hoeber incorporated a live cast model, named Kaci, to design and build a realistic prosthetic, the first of its kind, specifically for trans men.

In an interview, *Swiss Army Man*'s Makeup Effects Producer Hamer jokingly asks, "Do you wanna talk about the dick?" He laughs, laughs are heard off-screen, and then the clip abruptly ends. The penis effect, nearly a main character of its own, is an after-thought here, just as Dirk Diggler's claim to fame is only seen in the final shot of *Boogie Nights*. The subtext is the same: the prosthetic penis is a shock that disturbs a viewer into laughter. To cisgender people, the expectation is

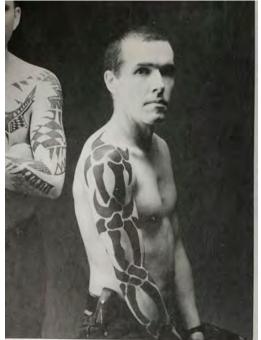


Photo by Bobby Neel Adams.



Kaci, a trans woman, was the first live cast model for a trans men's soft packer. A plaster cast led to a hard silicone pack-n-play and STP.



Pinocchio desires to be a "real boy," but he is a crafted likeness that doesn't quite replace human

that prosthetic penises are shocking *because* they're penises and therefore intertwined with connotations of sex and sexuality. They're funny because they're taboo, but also disturbing for their unattached detachability.

Trans men, too, shock and supposedly mock cisgender men by our ability to usurp what "should" belong only to them, but we're not to be taken seriously. Like a prosthetic packer made of material, a lump of silicone—a hybrid between a synthetic rubber and a synthetic plastic polymer—we're disposable. "Plastic" is a material and a general concept that encapsulates the larger world of substances of which prosthetics are made. But plastic is not found in nature; it is intrinsically synthetic, which complicates any concept of the natural world. It is anathema to nature, bringing to mind the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, with its roughly 79,000 tons of non-biodegradable plastic trash (Wetzel). In what cinema scholar Kristen Warner has theorized as "plastic representation," combined elements are shaped to look meaningful, but "only approximate depth and substance" due to a hollowness and superficiality that "cannot survive close scrutiny." Essentially, it's trash.

Like the mediocrity of cis men more generally, these [filmic] dicks don't know what they're doing. Crotch gazing is recognized within trans male culture, as well as queer cruising and disability cultures (specifically the wheelchair community) but is mocked or "mocked up" on screen, erasing trans men's positionality. The producers don't know functional and non-functional prosthetic penises exist, and have existed, because effects departments continually reinvent the objects and claim the pursuit is "new" and "has never been done." There remains a larger ignorance, on a broad cultural scale, of packers and packer use. There's a squeamishness to even the prospect; because packers are genitals, such objects first correlate with a sex toy instead of a daily use prosthesis, like any other. The wearing of a sexed part assumes a sex act (Mason Luke). Even if Hollywood is in the earliest stages of recognizing that trans men exist in the world, largely due to the platform Elliot Page has acquired, producers don't plan for trans men in the audience and have no knowledge that packers exist. Therefore, when real prosthetic penises are in the audience being accidentally mirrored on screen, it is in an alienating way, a way that is definitely wrong.

Swiss Army Man (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert —The Daniels, 2016)

In the 2016 film *Swiss Army Man*, Daniel Radcliffe plays a role that ultimately reverses what we think of as the core of humanity: life. Radcliffe is dead from the start of the film, and his corpse takes on animacy hallucinated (maybe) by his screen partner Hank, played by Paul Dano. Radcliffe's role, called Manny, is that of a multi-tool object (Hank never calls him a "Swiss Army Man," but does call him "the multipurpose tool guy"): his teeth can be used to shave Hank's face, his karate-chop arm action can chop wood, and he has a certain knack for pointing north. Manny has no identity or memory of his former life, and Hank educates

realness, but rather extends the definition of a real boy, just as his expanding nose illustrates. *Pinocchio* (Disney 1940)



Another crafted being, Frankenstein's Creature has become synonymous with prosthetic application. *Frankenstein* (James Whale 1931).



Hank and Manny meta-textually go to the movies and see a shadow-puppet meta-packer in the movie-within-a-movie.



him about the world in a way that Dr. Frankenstein never did for that other allusory reanimated corpse.

The film opens with Hank's bizarre introduction to Manny. Just as Hank is about to hang himself, apparently hopelessly stranded on a deserted island, Manny, already quite dead, has washed up on shore. Manny's drowned body is bloated with gas, and the opening credits run over Hank using Manny's farts to propel them through the water, hopefully approaching salvation. The film follows the pair on an odyssey through the woods, trying to locate civilization, with <code>Pinocchio/Frankenstein-esque</code> escapades along the way. Though unlike those texts in which central characters meet and interact with an ensemble of figures who provide life lessons, here Hank and Manny are very much alone with themselves, which forces them to play dress-up and reenact social encounters of the "real" world.

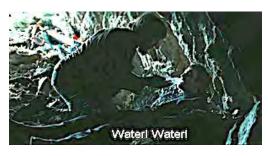
These reenactments serve as training for Manny, the Pinocchio/Creature character, who, as an object (in this case, a corpse as opposed to a wooden puppet), has no programming. Comically, Manny simplifies the mores of social life that we generally take for granted, which in perspective, makes many of them appear ridiculous (cisgender essentialism/coercive gender assignment, for instance, also appears absurd from a transgender perspective). Manny's learning episodes showcase social constructions of what counts as acceptable behavior. His introduction to the story exaggerates flatulence, though it is also a real side-effect of a drowning, but we learn Hank is too embarrassed to fart in front of anyone, which Manny takes as a personal offense.

Corresponding with Hank's distorted imagination, much of the film creatively concocts an art design that appears to be mixed materials of woodland flora and garbage. Hank uses these props and sets to teach Manny a myriad of social encounters, such as dancing, dining at a restaurant, meta-textually going to the movies, and even paying a toll and riding the bus, fully re-living Hank's imagined meet-cute with his purported girlfriend, Sarah (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). Hank's emphasis on Sarah backfires as Manny believes he is remembering his own life and that Sarah was his girlfriend.

In love with Sarah, Manny is motivated to save himself and Hank in order to return to her. The main conflict (other than man vs. nature) seems to be that Hank is in love with Sarah, but Manny thinks the relationship is his, when none of it turns out to be actual. The film's twist ending reveals Hank is in fact anti-social to the point of sociopathy. Hank is a stalker who surreptitiously photographed a woman on a bus, a stranger with whom he's become obsessed. He then self-designs this survival journey which the audience learns has occurred entirely in the wooded backyard of the unknown woman's home. Her name, Sarah, Hank only knows because he follows her social media, but he has neither met nor spoken to her.

As the audience most likely identifies with Hank (the more "human" compared to Manny) and has no reason to distrust Hank's lostness as a real situation, we don't know until the end that Sarah is a victim of stalking. In retrospect, the audience recognizes just how much of the story of Manny, his living character, is invented and even performed by Hank himself and his own manifestations. ...maybe. It is also possible to willingly believe Manny's life was indeed real, in a queered sense of trans-valuation where "reality" loses its supposed consistency and concreteness, even while recognizing Hank's failures and flaws.

Hank makes a reality all his own and wills Manny into life in a naming sequence. Hank shapes the corpse's lips until the expelled air from Manny's decaying body makes the sound pareidolically [7b] recognizable as a name: "Mah ehh. Mahn... ehh. Manny? Is that your name? Mahn... ehh. Hi, Manny. I'm Hank." In this





Rain runoff pours into Manny's mouth, turning him into a sort of well water source. The water effect is fantastically projectile.

shaping, Radcliffe's role is both named as, but also reduced to, being *man-y*. While Manny is the titular "Swiss Army Man," as addressed above, he serves many functions for Hank; as such, Manny's entire body has become object and is a full-body phallic replacement, a penis prosthetic for Hank to quite literally carry and manipulate. Manny has physical abilities Hank does not, and when Manny is able to produce liquid from his body that Hank ingests or when Manny has sexual arousal responses to stimuli, Hank is elated, perhaps into a kind of euphoria that contrasts with an accidental, but readable gender dysphoria threading throughout the film. For instance, in one of Manny's lines accidentally illustrative of gender dysphoria, he exclaims: "Something's going wrong with my boobs. My body is disgusting. It's horrible!"

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA





One of the many Radcliffe dummies Scheinert calls "frighteningly lifelike," questioning "if they're a man or not."



Jake Gyllenhaal's photorealistic animatronic dummy, severed from the waist down, in *Source Code* (Duncan Jones 2011), which the film's star described as the most believable prosthetic he'd ever seen.

But beyond the plot and characterization, I am fascinated by the extra-textual elements that make Manny, in so many words, come to life. Radcliffe is on screen for most shots, but there are also a number of dummy Radcliffes, animatronics, and roboticized special effects. The likenesses are perfect to the point where distinction is undetectable onscreen. The make-up department, led by make-up effects producer Jason Hamer, built four different life-like dummies of Radcliffe, molded on the actor's real body: one dummy was just a butt with tubes to allow air to be sprayed through it; another was a stunt dummy, weighted accurately so when dropped, the fall would look authentically (and disturbingly) human; a third was designed to be carried by Dano, lightweight enough to wear draped over his back as opposed to carrying the full weight of an adult man on his shoulders; and then the "hero" model for close-up shots, with molded heads described by codirector Daniel Scheinert as "frighteningly lifelike." Fittingly, Scheinert, retorting about the dummies, accidentally provokes trans suspicion: "It was real creepy on set. You would just see these dead bodies sitting around in the woods, and you're never sure if they're a man or not" ("Behind the Scenes"). [open endnotes and bibliography in new page

Another photorealistic animatronic dummy appeared in *Source Code* (Duncan Jones 2011), which led the film's star Jake Gyllenhaal to exclaim "It was the most believable prosthetic I've ever seen" (*Source Code* commentary). Gyllenhaal's uncanny inanimate double is severed from the waist down, and therefore similarly suspicious—his absence of genitals produces cis questioning as to being "a man or not." Radcliffe's role instead, however, requires phallic excess. With "man" in the title and in his name, Manny is so excessively man-y, his penis is fully animated, moving in unnatural, spectacular ways, and in real time (meaning all effects were captured in camera rather than as a post-production addition).

The Daniels wanted "the actors to be able to react to these surreal things." Kwan elaborates his partnership with Scheinert shares "a fascination for practical effects and doing things in camera and finding ways to do things kind of the way they used to do them" ("Behind the Scenes"). One of their effects designers describes the prop piece "piece," as "old-school animatronics, the way that they should be done." If the prop's roboticized mechanisms are "old-school," it is because they are evocative of earlier 1980s effects, with a vertebrae structure that enables a sense of bending organic movement. A vertebral insert is common for prosthetic packers, as well, pre-existing the film. Yet, as previously mentioned, Hamer and Seiple paradoxically claimed the production team were doing things that have never been done before.





A vertebral insert is common for prosthetic packers. This one is designed by PeeCock Products, which pre-existed the film, but certainly looks and maneuvers very like the device designed for *Swiss Army Man*.

Radcliffe's special-effected crotch is almost its own character in the film. The Daniels readily admit they were shooting "three-person scene[s]: Manny, Hank, and boner" ("Robo Wiener"). But there are many other elements that open themselves to trans/queer readings, beyond the focal point erection. The film opens with suicidal Hank escaping a (supposedly) deserted island using Manny as a jet ski. Manny's decaying body is expelling gas, and in a fantastically weird sequence that includes the title card, Hank literally rides Manny's ass to potential salvation. Dano and other stunt doubles ride motorized devices modeled on Radcliffe's body. Because the gimmick works so well, the film later returns to the butt-jet ski escape.





A prop designer displays the device worn by Radcliffe and describes it as "old-school animatronics, the way that they should be

The butt as a jet-ski: Hank is thrilled to straddle Manny.





The butt had tubes to allow air to be sprayed through it.

Behind the scenes, Dano holds a model of Radcliffe's posterior, scaled to life.

On the subsequent appearance of the gag, Radcliffe's butt is out, which serves to further blur the distinction between him and the animatronic. Both kinds of shots expose Radcliffe as the device is modeled on his physical body.[8] Sometimes, the actor himself is onscreen, but other times, closely framed shots center devices that are only pieces of Radcliffe, like the jet-ski butt, and, of course, the animated penis which has its own close-ups.





False butt.

Real butt.

Intentionally blurring the distinction between Radcliffe, the actor and Radcliffe's animatronic double, similar shots fluctuate between false butt and actual butt. Both kinds of shots expose Radcliffe as the device is modeled on his physical body.

Manny's magical erection works like a compass pointing the way home while he and Hank are lost in the woods. The whirling erect penis was a practical special effect, a mechanized robotic penis, operated off-screen by a puppeteer and worn by Radcliffe very much like a strap-on dildo. This mechanism reappears throughout the film because, though unusual, it is an important narrative (and literal) device. Fragmented bodies in this film are a formal cinematic element as well as thematic in the plot and dialogue. The first erection occurs when Manny sees an old magazine featuring a bikini-clad centerfold model. He learns, maybe not what women are, but what Mulvey defined in 1975 as "fetishistic scopophilia." The film literalizes, thematizes, and articulates a scopophilic gaze in which women are sexually objectified into bodily fragments to-be-looked-at: "Boobs, vaginas, and butts."

Manny becomes spontaneously aroused, though he is unsure of the cause, unable to connect the images of the woman to the bodily response. Worried, he pleads to Hank in language suggesting he has an assigned-female body: "Something's going wrong with my boobs." It comes across as comedy because the slightly inaccurate wording is not generally how men would refer to their chests. Going "wrong" for Manny in this moment, his heart has begun to beat again as a response to the arousal, although sometimes cadaver hearts still beat even after brain death. The beating heart might even account for the erection as blood is somehow pumping. But the subtext for a trans man viewer here is the gender dysphoria inherent in the "wrongness" of "boobs"—an unintentional side effect of the comedic one-liner. The heartbeat flutter doesn't last long because the actual spectacle, the star of the show, the "hero," is Manny's penis erecting. Manny, revolted by it, screams. Luckily, he and Hank quickly learn Manny's erection is magical and serves a practical purpose for them.

The penis compass is fueled by Manny's desire for the supposedly forgotten love of Sarah, but it works extra-diegetically on my own trans desire to be allowed, even expressly encouraged, to *look* point blank at a man's crotch. Manny's erection is given significant screen time, and while it likely plays with hegemonic discomforts, anxieties, perhaps homophobia for cishetero male viewers, it felt like a gift given to me. The comedic value is, for a trans man audience member, far secondary to the priority of looking so plainly at a male body, an experience patriarchy limits and punishes. As trans elder Loren Cameron, a photographer who decades ago considered how trans bodies look and are looked at, has



"Boobs, vaginas, and butts": The film thematizes bodily fragments-as-objects while it articulates "to-be-looked-at-ness."





Weekend at Bernie's (Ted Kotcheff 1989). Loosely based on Jorge Amado's 1959 modernist novella *The Two Deaths of Quincas* Wateryell, this bizarre black comedy stars Jonathan Silverman and Brat Packer Andrew McCarthy. To avoid suspicion of murder, the buddy duo attempts to convince people that their boss Bernie (Terry Kiser) is still alive.





Swiss Army Knife: An intimate moment underwater, in its sincerity, shifts the film out of dark comedy.

explained, "we watch men a lot" (You Don't Know Dick, Bestor Cram 1997).

The visual elements could stand alone, and while Radcliffe's erection is prostheticized with mechanical movement, the shots of fragmented body parts could be static—they could be paused, frozen, and screen-captured like the images above. But as I addressed earlier, this device is also essential to the narrative. The plot would not move if Manny's wiener did not also do so. The story is careful with its plot sequencing, but the Daniels' directorial style also takes on unusual generic choices that amalgamate to become a strange-looking body, paralleling these creators with Dr. Frankenstein. Even though the tone of the film is largely an absurdist black comedy, unavoidably reminiscent of *Weekend at Bernie's* (Ted Kotcheff 1989), unexpected moments of melodrama surface to make the film, like a Harawavian chimera, difficult to categorize.

Rather than casting typically comedic actors, the Daniels selected two men whose careers are especially prolific and varied given their relative youth (Radcliffe was in his late 20s and Dano his early 30s at the time of filming). While Radcliffe began as a child actor and will always be known for the Harry Potter films, he was able to disengage himself from typecasting during the production of the eight-film franchise. He acted on stage in dramas as well as musicals, and he continues to appear in films and on television in genres ranging from romantic comedy to horror.[10] Similarly, Dano, only five years Radcliffe's senior, also began as a child actor, but in theatre, sharing the Broadway stage with George C. Scott in Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's classic Inherit the Wind. While Radcliffe was mid-Harry Potter, Dano co-starred with Brian Cox in L.I.E. (Michael Cuesta 2001), a film about ephebophilia. Dano and Radcliffe have acted historical, musical, romantic, sexual, sci-fi, dark, and comedic material, and even weird speculation, Horns (Alexandre Aja 2013) and Guns Akimbo (Jason Lei Howden 2020) and Where the Wild Things Are (Spike Jonze 2009) and Okja (Bong Joonho 2017), for Radcliffe and Dano respectively.

The actors' versatility allows the more dramatic moments to work through the otherwise absurdity. One scene is especially moving when Manny looks out from their makeshift bus window and laments, "so this is the life I've forgotten." The pair also have many bittersweet, even intimate moments together, sometimes holding hands. Hank cross-dresses to tutor Manny in how to initiate talking to a woman on the bus (symbolizing Sarah, their mutual object of affection). Manny compliments Hank-as-Sarah, who blushes, but quite sincerely responds as Hank himself: "You think I look beautiful?". Following a romantic comedy motif, the pair almost kiss, but then decide they are both drunk.

The romance is resuscitated after the two fall into a river, and under the guise of using Manny's gas to rise to the surface, what results is an *actually* romantic underwater kiss. The tenderness in the relationship between the men adds depth to what might otherwise be viewed as typical, easy gay jokes of the kind that often populate the gross-out subgenre of male buddy comedies. Here the kiss is taken seriously rather than as a punchline. What might in another film land as a homophobic joke evokes instead an earnest hopefulness for intimacy. In a sillier scenario early in the film, Hank, fed up with Manny's unending farts, plugs him up with a cork. Manny later references this quite sexual act, which was only hinted at earlier, and bluntly asks, "Remember when you put that cork in my butt? Was that sex?" Manny is acquiring information about how the world of social relations works, but it is also made clear the couple have developed a serious, intimate, and very real, relationship all their own.



Two Hanks, one presenting male, one presenting female. The viewer, if attentive enough to catch the brief few frames, might wonder: who are the Hanks looking at?





Bear attack scene: The fire stunt, coordinated by Jessica Harbeck, was done with a double in place of Radcliffe doing a forward flip on wires. Bear is to the left, roaring.



Manny is briefly puppeteered marionette-style, reinforcing both his object-ness and his allusive intimacy with Pinocchio: the male object who, through intense desire, became real.

Swiss Army Man might seem to be a film of its own unique genre, but as I've been suggesting, it is a hybrid of multiple styles, including, of course dark comedy, in addition to melodrama and romance. It also has elements of the Gothic, which is why it could be considered a speculative text. Certainly, we have a reanimated corpse which connects it, even if indirectly, to *Frankenstein*. A closer look finds a brief moment, one that almost entirely evades witnessing, in which Hank is doubled, and the pair of Hanks both look into the camera lens. In what is only a few frames that a viewer could easily miss in a blink, the entire nature of the narrative shifts.

Because Radcliffe's performance is virtuosic, because the dummies and animatronics are photorealistic, and because Radcliffe and Dano form a relationship together naturally, the narrative to this point is believable as we travel the journey with Hank. We believe Manny is not only really there with him, but we also believe Manny is indeed talking and capable of trans-human ability that exceeds natural law. Hank's double scene literalizes the narrative's metaphor, otherwise in the background, that Hank is confronting himself, like the many doubles of the 19th century Gothic tradition. According to George Haggerty, all gothic fiction is the confrontation of the horror that is oneself (53). When Hank is doubled, it suggests he is both Hank and Manny. While Manny might be a manifestation of Hank's mental illness (the film opens with his attempted suicide, after all), wondering who is looking at the two of them from the camera's point of view, and to whom they return the gaze(s), provokes the uncanny. Further transing the cinematic moment, the shots in which Dano is looking at the audience, he is costumed as both Hank and Hank-as-Sarah, so multiply-gendered Hanks co-exist in one frame.

Brief as it is, I wouldn't use this moment of doubling as an answer to the mysterious events of Swiss Army Man. If Hank is Manny, there are many things that go unexplained, but it is most important, given the focus of this study, to think of Manny and his body not as a symbol or evidence of psychosis, but as an object. Manny is very present, animate or not. Manny is also quite dead. His adventure with Hank extends his natural life into a new identity. As he learns how humanity works, Manny follows the narrative trajectories of other speculative trans-humans, like Pinocchio and Frankenstein's Creature, who in their acquisition of knowledge and abilities, also acquire humanity. It would be easy to simplify all of Swiss Army Man as Hank's mentally ill hallucination because he consistently controls, manipulates, and articulates Manny like a puppet. One could define a puppet as Steve Tillis does: "a more or less cleverly constructed and operated tool," only giving the illusion of life, "made to pretend to be something that it is not," and signifying "nothing more than a roughly anthropomorphic design" (111-112). But to reduce Manny to illusion and pretense, a provocatively cissexist accusation in its "reality enforcement," misses one very important and radically trans element of the film.

To bring the film to extreme stakes at its climax, the Daniels incorporate a wild bear attack. If Manny is only as his title role suggests, a cleverly operated tool, according to Tillis, "the puppet has no will of its own" (111). But for a period, Manny chooses to return to a fully lifeless state. During the deadly threat of the bear, however, to scare the animal away and save Hank, Manny returns to life and crawls toward their campfire to ignite one of his farts with the flame. Therefore, Manny does something even further beyond his "multi-tool" abilities, something utterly impossible: *he moves under his own volition*. Of course, Radcliffe is alive, but Manny is not, and it is Manny who exhibits agency to create change. His objectness saves Hank, a life that mirrors his own (even in death), in this moment and throughout the film. Extra-diegetically, the robotic penis doubles a packer,

which is an object that saves trans men's lives.

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Notes

- 1. Crystal Emery has described crotch-gazing as "the view from a wheelchair," and those in the wheelchair community "have become bulge connoisseurs."
- 2. A joke, but an accurate critique, one line in the skit expresses indignation: "you had a show called *Hung* about a guy with a big dick, and we never got to see it?!"
- 3. This function is primary in packers labeled as STP's or Stand-to-Pee devices.
- 4. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has carefully and thoroughly considered the spectacle of "staring," primarily in relation to visibly disabled bodies and the meanings we give to human variations, but she clearly notes, "staring shows us something about how we look *at* each other and how we look *to* each other" (4). She does a close analysis on anatomies likely to draw stares, but among the singular anatomical parts (faces, hands, and breasts), she leaves out male genitalia, and so, with all the forms of staring she includes, the crotch remains missing.
- 5. Cinemattractions, February 1998 (cited in French and Kahn).
- 6. Documents from as far back as 16th century Europe describe leather devices worn by those assigned female at birth for the purpose of naturalistic packing. See: Ria Brodell and Brigitte Eriksson.
- 7. The description on IMDB is decidedly better, it should be noted.
- 7b. Pareidolia is a psychological phenomenon describing the human ability to see shapes or patterns, read significance, and make a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous object or visual stimulus.
- 8. With his pants down, Radcliffe becomes hyper-exposed, but given his earlier career move, mid-*Harry Potter* franchise, to do a nude scene live on stage in the West End and Broadway revivals of Peter Shaffer's *Equus* in 2007-2008, and later, an explicit gay sex scene in *Kill Your Darlings* (John Krokidas 2013), seeing Radcliffe's butt here holds somewhat less shock value than it might for other child stars.
- 9. Combining his musical and comedic abilities, he is about to appear in the 2022 biopic of "Weird Al" Yankovic (*Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*, directed by Eric Appel).

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A welcome contribution to decolonizing film theory

review by María Mercedes Vázquez Vázquez

Theorizing Colonial Cinema: Reframing Production, Circulation, and Consumption of Film in Asia. Edited by Nayoung Aimee Kwon, Takushi Odagiri and Moonim Baek.

Theorizing Colonial Cinema (2022) is a timely study of coloniality in film theory and practice. In broad terms, the book responds to the rise of Asia in the global economic arena and aligns with contemporary sensibilities in film studies striving to decolonize both film production and screen studies. Although the book's subtitle promises to cover production, circulation, and consumption of film in Asia, the actual regional focus is on East Asian cinemas.

Welcome to Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire. This website holds detailed information on over 6000 films showing images of life in the British colonies. Over 150 films are available for viewing online. You can search or browse for films by country, date, topic, or keyword. Over 350 of the most important films in the catalogue are presented with extensive critical notes written by our academic research team.

The Colonial Film project united universities (Birkbeck and University College London) and archives (British Film Institute, Imperial War Museum and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum) to create a new catalogue of films relating to the British Empire. The ambition of this website is to allow both colonizers and colonized to understand better the truths of Empire.

The contributors' diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and regional expertise is appropriate in a publication examining trans-colonial engagements and calling for an ethics of relationality and reciprocity. Despite this diversity, the chapters are cohesively related thanks to their shared decolonizing aim and coherent epistemology. The editors, Nayoung Aimee Kwon, Takushi Odagiri and Moonim Baek effectively tie the chapters together. They achieve an obvious dialogue between chapters, no doubt a positive result of a collective research methodology structured through seminars, conferences, and other means of scholarly communication.

The book breaks with the dyadic rhetoric traditionally used to approach colonized cinemas and colonial subjectivities with terms such as colonizer/colonized and resistance/collaboration. The essays demonstrate that the realities and cultures of colonized territories and peoples are much more entangled and complex than simple oppositions indicate. For instance, take the case of the South Korean filmmaker Hŏ Yŏng whose career illustrates well the inadequacy of these common dichotomies. Throughout his life he used different pseudonyms to hide his Korean origins, and he counts in his oeuvre such ideologically opposed films as Japanese imperial propaganda films alongside Indonesian independentist films.



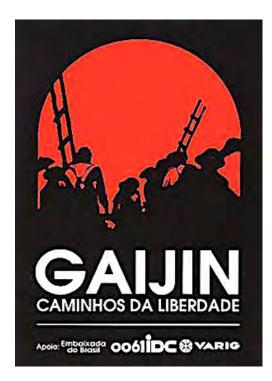
This is a useful web archive. http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/



Kvann de la Cruz, experimental Filipino filmmaker and artist.



Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* released on the year of Hong Kong's handover to China (1997) and set in Argentina. Characters dancing tango. Photo credits: La nación.



Gaijin: A Brazilian Odyssey, a 1980's film by Tizuka Yamasaki about Japanese migrants to Brazil. photo credit https://www.filmaffinity.com/es/film970979.html

This collection aims to distinguish itself from prior scholarly examinations of colonial and imperial cinemas by situating Asian archives at the center of research. Previously, film scholars studying this region often used data gathered from archives located at the centers of former imperial powers. In contrast, this book brings to light East Asian film theorists, critics, and scholars such as Im Hwa, Lu Xun and Imamura Tahei, and filmmakers like Kvan de la Cruz, who deserve much more international attention than they have enjoyed so far. At the same time, the volume also benefits from film and cultural studies scholarship produced in the Euro-American centers of knowledge by renowned scholars such as Miriam Hansen, Fredric Jameson, Kristin Thompson, Dudley Andrew, and Bertolt Brecht, among others, and in the periphery of Empire such as Frantz Fanon, an important theoretical reference in several chapters. In this way, the writers in this book often make enlightening observations about parallel theoretical developments in Euro-American theory-production centers and East Asian ones.

All the chapters in the collection offer a rich and rigorous study of their respective subjects and a balanced attention to consumption, production and circulation is well achieved throughout. Some of the distinct areas explored include the following:

- regions where unequal colonial relations were not obvious through differences in skin color;
- the multilayered Western-plus-Eastern colonial experiences felt by many Asian subjects (experiencing Western empires plus the Japanese empire, for instance):
- the Cold War continuation of colonial-imperial dynamics that led to the physical but not ideological disappearance of colonization.

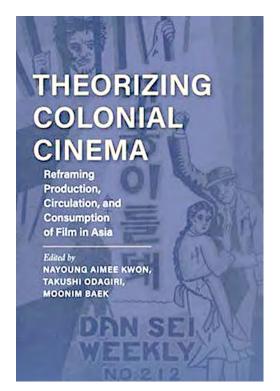
In addition to these unique contributions, the anthology's breadth is comprehensive in terms of time periods and range of representation. East Asian film industries are discussed from early national cinema to contemporary films streamed globally, from East Asian productions released during the Japanese and Western imperial occupations of East Asian territories, to U.S. productions about Asia or distributed in Asia. Comparisons abound between colonial and anticolonialist approaches to the same historical subject matter. For example a discussion of the Philippine-American war, for instance, is seamlessly combined with Taiwanese figurations of the Tarzan franchise from Hollywood. The comparison brings to light two completely different forms of film production under coloniality.

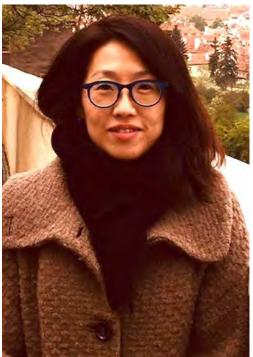
I should now like to examine some of the essays in the book in greater detail.

Introduction by Nayoung Aimee Kwon and Takushi Odagiri

The introduction explains the rationale for this book: cinema has an intimate relationship with colonialism, which has often been taken for granted or disavowed instead of closely examined. Taking advantage of the opening of colonial archives in the East, the editors propose a "theoretical paradigm shift" [1] [open endnotes in new window] that moves away from monolingual, fixed and privileged sites of research. While this aim is commendable, its full achievement has yet to be accomplished, since still most of the contributors are professionally based at the privileged geopolitical locations where the Anglophone scholarly traditions were generated.

In terms of predecessors, this collection draws inspiration from Ann Stoler's *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Time*, and Lee Grieveson's and Colin





In this study of global film history, interdisciplinary scholars from film studies, Asian studies and postcolonial studies consider how the present is haunted by the colonial past. Edited by Professor Nayoung Aimee Kwon with Takushi Odagiri and Moonim Baek, the book engages new perspectives by asking how prior discussions on the form, theory, history and ideology of film may be challenged by centering the colonial question. The collection pinpoints various forms of devaluation and misrecognition both in and beyond Asia that continue to relegate local voices to the margins. Photos ffom Duke U Press website.

MacCabe's *Empire and Film* and *Film at the End of Empire*. [2] Stoler's method for the examination of colonial histories and archives and her call for methodological renovations to history writing in view of them is closely followed in several chapters of this volume. As for Grieveson's and MacCabe's work, this book's editors partially commit to exploring the research in Asian archives because Grievson and MacCabe exclusively used British ones. However, since the new anthology had this theoretical paradigm shift in mind, I am surprised that they did not discuss the pioneering, multi-situated and multilingual research on colonial and imperial cinemas practiced by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their widely cited 1994's monograph *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* [3]. Also, the "vast transnational and multilingual network" participating in *Theorizing Colonial Cinema* could have benefitted even further from an incorporation of *postcolonial* research on national cinemas in other colonized areas of the world such as Latin America.

This edited volume challenges epistemologies of empire, as is also happening in other areas of Asian scholarship. However, as often happens, those Eurocentric epistemologies of empire are not always exactly traced. Some of the chapters indeed draw from non-Western theories such as the writings of Frantz Fanon, Trinh T. Minh-ha or Dipesh Chakrabarty, but authors also often cite European or U.S. theorists inspiring decolonial thinking, such as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. In that light, it would be useful to reflect upon how those who suffered fascist or racial persecution in the West now provide theoretical tools for decolonizing academia.

The book comprises three parts, chronologically and historically arranged. The first part contains five chapters on cinema produced from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century; the two chapters of the second part explore the connections between the cinema of the era of empires and that of the Cold War; and the last three chapters in the third section analyze the presence of colonial pasts in 20th and 21st century films. I will organize my discussion of specific essays under these three headings.

Part I: Time and racialized other: colonial modernity and early cinema

As a case study, the book starts with an analysis of a documentary's alignment with the colonial and imperial project. In "Time, Race, and The Asynchronous in The Colonial Documentaries of Malaya," Nadine Chan shows how a documentary filmed by the British Strand Film Company (Alexander Shaw's *Five Faces of Malaya*) depicts the South East Asian territory of British Malaya to construct a colonial audiovisual narrative akin to colonial historicism. According to the latter, races are associated with temporal epochs and perceived levels of development. The native Malay population in this documentary are shot in a way as to signify underdevelopment or a place "out of history" while other races are represented as propelling Malaya to advance in history and modernity. The white imperial British citizens are, tellingly, hardly visible in the documentary.

As Chan demonstrates, the racial harmony and multicultural tone described in *Five Faces of Malaya* was out of sync with socio-political movements and communities imagined (in Benedict Anderson's terms) by the Malayan territories that had been absorbed by the British Empire at the time of the documentary's release. The harmonious plurinational model represented in the film from the



Alexander Shaw's Five Faces of Malaya (Malay Bride).



The Korean Malcontent in A Ferryboat without An Owner, 1932.

colonial perspective did not coincide with how Malay nationalists, for instance, envisioned connectivity in the Malay race and how they resented immigration and damages to their culture due to new economic developments. Furthermore, *Five Faces of Malaya* also contains incoherent details about the historical development of certain races, a sign that a clear narrative associating races to certain stages of historical development produced by the imperial power in which the British figured as the administrative minds could not be fully sustained thanks to the documentary genre's capacity to witness history. This contradiction between the construction of a colonial image of racial harmony and reality is obvious in the depiction of the Malay race, both seen as backward and lazy peasants unable to rule themselves and following medieval customs and modernized tennis players. The different circulation of this documentary in the center of the Empire and Malaya reveals the documentary's imperial ideology even further. The film was hardly seen in the Malay territory where it was filmed, but successful in the colonial metropolis.

In the second chapter, "Facing Malcontent Colonial Korean Comrades: A Typology of Colonial Cinema in Asia's Socialist Alliances," Moonim Baek offers a typology of colonial cinema. Baek examines how a socialist alliance between the metropolitan Japanese and the colonized Koreans did not erase racial prejudices against the Koreans. Discourses around the figure of the malcontent Korean "pullyong sonin," particularly in two poems and two pieces of film criticism, reveal a Japanese colonizing view of the colonized other (the Korean); this occurred among socialist critics but runs against socialism's presumed international solidarity. This trope can be generalized. The figure of the spontaneous and defiant colonized subject is seemingly heroic. But it also fits a common mechanism for ghettoizing the colonized. Picking that figure out becomes a measurement of control and identification of the rebellious colonized in a region where physical (racial) differences between the colonizer and the colonized are not obvious. In this way, a recurrent figure of a malcontent Korean who will use spontaneous violent action to combat an imperial elite was endorsed by socialist Japanese intellectuals. They viewed Japan as the socialist center of the Japanese Empire, much like Moscow was perceived as the socialist center of Eurasia, and this was their way their way of formulating an image of rebellion and of the (inferior, flawed) rebel.

In contrast, the socialist Korean poet and film critic Im Hwa responded to the usual derogatory typification of Koreans such as the pullyŏng sŏnin in poetry and film by creating poems and producing socialist films that counteracted such colonial imaginaries. He promoted a true socialist alliance between the working classes without ethnic or national hierarchies. Sadly the Korean socialist films that Im Hwa considered true Korean cinema are lost, which reminds me once again of the importance of carrying out archival research on and preserving this early cinema.

Following the first two chapters on the representation of mostly colonial subjects in early colonial cinema, the third chapter opens the discussion of film theory production in the colonies. In "Colonial-Era Film Theory, Spectatorship, and the Problem of Internalization," Aaron Gerow makes an important point about the relation between film production and film theory. Although Japan was the main colonial power in East Asia, it occupied a neocolonial position in relation to the centers of film theory in the West. That imbalance then impinged on the media theory produced both in Japan and Korea. Theorizations of colonial spectatorship by Korean subjects now allow us to perceive their relation to the metropole. This essay and the book as a whole establish a very important level of discussion—how to problematize the internalization of the colonial gaze by the colonized at the level of theory. Here Gerow asks whether the Korean theorists simply assumed a layered colonial gaze (Western and Japanese). He suggests a supplement to the traditional study of the gaze, often used to examine colonial psychic

internalization, with further reflections on spectatorship in the colonial setting that are still needed. In this case, Gerow traces a significant interest in spectatorship in Japanese film theory (audiences being judged for their lack of modernity by theorists or, on the contrary, deemed to exercise modernity through cinema). In some instances, Japanese theorists orientalized their colonized subjects much as the West had orientalized Japan. In those cases, Japan would be producing the "universal" theory about the gaze whereas the local colonized writers would be writing about particular cases. Here, a comparison between Im Hwa and O Yŏng-jin offers two different approaches by colonized theorists.

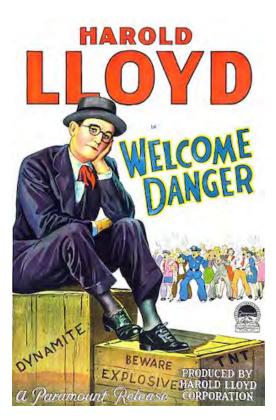
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Welcome Danger (Clyde Bruckman, starring Harold Lloyd), 1929, is an example of a ruHua film



The Red Lantern: the young Chinese woman rescued by the whites.

The last two chapters of Part I approach colonial modernity in relation to Western film production. They challenge "the binary model of colonial oppression versus nationalist resistance" [4] [open endnotes in new window] by paying attention to the negotiations and discordant voices that emerged with the reception of colonial cinema. Following Miriam Hansen's "vernacular modernism" approach to the study of modernity that focuses on its cultural and affective dimensions, Yiman Wang examines colonial cinema of the first three decades of the 20th century, centering around the discourses surrounding the ruHua or Chinese derogatory films. Wang dissects the different reactions that this body of films prompted, particularly among two groups of Chinese: overseas Chinese living in the United States and mainland Chinese. Entwined with tracing these reactions, the chapter delves into the nascent Chinese film industry that grew in this period. This study allows Wang to trace the multiple affective responses to Western cinema—both as made by overseas spectators and by the growing Chinese industry. An additional consideration is that the Chinese industry was not always in the hands of ethnic Chinese filmmakers and companies, especially in its beginnings.

In her chapter "World Export: Melodramas of Colonial Conquest," Jane M. Gaines offers an impressive exercise of theoretical inquiry into the use of terms such as "vernacular modernism" or "modernism," "classical Hollywood narratives of continuity editing," and "melodrama." Gaines posits that it is melodrama, with its attunement to the social reality, that allows us to theorize the confluences between West and East. Her detailed attention to narrative conflicts in the early film, *The Red Lantern* (Albert Capellani, 1919), combined with her attention to the film's reception and circulation and musical accompaniment demonstrates the complexities of what she calls "the melodramas of colonial conquest." By identifying this genre and its thematic, she avoids the binaries typically associated with the body of "China humiliating films" built on Western colonizing views of the East and Easterner's rejection of those.

Contrary to what is commonly accepted and was popularized by Kristin Thompson's *Exporting Entertainment* [5], it might be more accurate to affirm that instead of the classical Hollywood narratives of continuity editing, the melodramas of race and nation in the style of *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) facilitated the global dominance of Hollywood. Gaines demonstrates the inadequacy of using terms such as "classical" or "modernist" to describe the cinema that was exported from the West to the East or how it was received. Both of these terms contradict the effect that the colonial cinema of the early 20th century produced: the former term because "classic" is inherently opposed to the newness that these colonial narratives promised. And "modernist" is a term that, according to Fredric Jameson, [6] was only defined after World War II, a posteriori. Furthermore, "modernist" is opposed to the continuity effect and affective identification—characteristics that are essential for understanding the cinema that represents colonial cinema of the beginning of the 20th century.

Gaines moves beyond the general assumptions about the effects of cultural imperialism of the West over the East by theorizing the export of U.S. cinema to conquer East Asian (and global) audiences at the onset of World War I. She posits a "colonial conquest genre" since, for her, there are more films that fit into this genre than what is commonly understood. Furthermore, the specific circulation of *The Red Lantern* allows Gaines to examine the tensions between West and East while considering the communities caught in between, such as the Chinese



The Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, 1915) was an early and influential exponent of racism in U.S. cinema.



Korean filmmaker Hŏ Yŏng/Hinatsu Eitarō/Huyung on the left.

nationals living in the United States at the time of the film's release. In fact, the film was never exported to the place which it attempted to portray because of the strong reaction that it prompted from this diasporic community. Much as *The Birth of a Nation* stimulated film production to counteract its racist portrayal of African Americans, *The Red Lantern* prompted the development of a Chinese national film industry to correct falsehoods about the Chinese and the Eurasians. I found particularly useful the comparison of *The Red Lantern* with *The Birth of a Nation* as a way of shedding light on a complex intercultural confluence at play between West and East that challenges simple dynamics of acceptance and rejection.

Part II: Divided mise-en-scène: colonial cinema and cold war afterimages

As mentioned, the continuation of the cultural dynamics of coloniality in the postwar Cold War era is one of the most original contributions of this collective volume. Two chapters serve this original and useful purpose, continued in part III —Zhang Zhen's comparison of the Taiwanese Tarzan with the Hollywood Tarzan in "Tarzan/Taishan and Other Orphans: Taiwan's Melodrama of Decolonization," and Thomas Barker's and Nikki J. Y. Lee's study of a Korean filmmaker in "What Is an Auteur? Hŏ Yŏng/Hinatsu Eitarō/Huyung between (Post)colonial Indonesia, Japan, and Korea." The Korean film director Hŏ Yŏng started his career during the time when Korea was a Japanese colony authoring one of the most successful Japanese propaganda films. He ended it filming Indonesian proindependence and anti-colonial films. Both chapters successfully reinforce the book's general aim of challenging the strict binaries that abound in postcolonial film histories of East Asian cinemas with paired concepts such as rebel/collaborator.

Zhang Zhen follows Gaines' theoretical application of the melodrama genre to colonial cinema in the context of West-East relations, but her argument centers on Taiwanese language cinema (*Taiyupian*) of the 1960s. Zhang traces an allegory, "orphan of Asia," representing Taiwan's distortions under coloniality. The allegory comes from a famous novel by Wu Zhuoliu and much later is found in the film *Tarzan and Treasure* (Lian Che-fu, 1965). As Zhang tells us, the orphan trope echoes with Sinophone audiences beyond Taiwan, evoking "innocence wronged, state violence, and abandonment by the nation that one belongs to" (129). The pathos felt becomes particularly complex in the case of Taiwan, given its geopolitical location and history entangled with mainland China, Japan and different nations from the West.

If Zhang's analysis of the evolution of the orphan theme in *Taiyupian* sheds light on the politics of mass culture under the Cold War, her attention to film circulation complements her analysis. While the popularity of *Taiyupian* in the film markets of South East Asia have challenged Hollywood's global hegemony in the region, the Taishan films also have disseminated Orientalizing ideologies inherent in the original Western characterization of Tarzan in a way that is detrimental to indigenous Taiwanese and South East Asian audiences.

Also in this section, Thomas Barker and Nikki J. Y. Lee present one of the book's most illustrative cases of the blurring of boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized. Hŏ Yŏng was a Korean filmmaker trained in Japan who collaborated as a culture man (*bunkajin*) for the Japanese Empire and filmed the Japanese propaganda film *You and I* in 1941. He went to film in Indonesia during the Japanese invasion of this country but remained there after World War 2. In his later years in that country, he shot Indonesian-independentist films during the Cold War. Director Hŏ Yŏng's adoption of Japanese and Indonesian pseudonyms



Tarzan and Treasure is a Taiwanese film about a treasure hunting with a Taiwanese Tarzan.

at different moments of his life suggest that he had to perform different identities to fit into the colonial and cold war societies where he lived and developed his filmmaking. Both his identity and his art were shaped by colonization. Usually film histories written in postcolonial contexts privilege narratives glorifying resistance against colonialism; they neglect filmmakers like Hŏ Yŏng. In fact, his life demonstrates that filmmakers and ordinary individuals have long survived by employing more complex strategies beyond the binary of capitulation/resistance to respond to violent historical processes.

Part III: Millennial hauntings: rising global Asian cinemas

The third part of the book traces coloniality's persistence in today's globalized and neocolonial cultures; colonialism's effects are still present in contemporary cultural production and circulation. The first of the three chapters in this section does so by linking today's discourses on cultural *hybridity* with colonial subjectivities. The case study used for this demonstration centers around the wartime propaganda animation film, *Momotarō: Divine Warriors of the Sea* (1945) and Imamura Tahei's film theory from the same time. The second delves into the potential of experimental cinema for a "decolonial figuration of history" (187), taking the film *Balangiga: Howling Wilderness* by punk Filipino filmmaker Khavn as an example. Lastly, the book concludes with a chapter on the memories of the colonial past in 21st century productions, including as examples the 2016 Korean film *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook) and other similar feature films.

The survival of coloniality (distinguished from colonialism) in cinema well past the actual existence of the colonies and empires is the central argument of Takushi Odagiri's essay, "Cinema's Coloniality." He argues that colonial subjectivities are expressed through human-animal distinctions. He finds this in a Japanese wartime animation *Momotarō* by director Seo Mitsuyō and asserts that that trope persists in today's cinematic celebration of hybridity. Takushi Odagiri traces how the film's anthropomorphic centrism hides the colonial gaze over the colonized nonhuman, and he then shows how this unconscious colonial subjectivity persists in 21st century thinking and cultural production. Odagiri brings together Bertolt Brecht and the Japanese film critic Imamura Tahei to examine the mechanisms through which such subjectivities underlying a seeming neutral hybridity can be unveiled and contested.

José Capino complements these chapters on South Korean and Japanese cinemas with an essay on the cinema of the Philippines, "A Hallucinatory History of the Philippine-American War: Khavn's Balangiga: Howling Wilderness." Capino closely examines the experimental work by the Filipino filmmaker Khavn de la Cruz *Balalinga: Howling Wilderness* (2017). Based on the atrocities committed in the Philippines during the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), dialectical images in Khavn's *Balalinga* counteract U.S. colonial education and Cold War propaganda. In particular, Capino connects the colonial past with the neocolonial present, arguing that avant-garde films like Khavn's engender a "dialectical recognizability of the past-in-the-present and the present-in-the-past"[7], an idea famously theorized by Walter Benjamin [8]. Such interventions into film form are important because the kind of historical consciousness that this experimental film raises, Capino convincingly argues, extends beyond the Philippines.



Momotaro: the human.



Momotaro: the animals.



Balangiga: a Filipino film set in a site of a massacre that took place during the fight from independence from the United States.



The Handmaiden/Agassi: a successful Korean film circulating in global networks.

This book's varied but cohesive collection concludes with "Millennial Vengeance: Park Chan-wook's Agassi (The Handmaiden) and the Return of Postcolonial Japonisme," on a successful South-Korean film that has been distributed globally by streaming services and is part of a new wave of transnational Asian cinemas. Set in colonial Korea under Japanese occupation, the film that author Nayoung Aimee Kwon focuses on, *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016), goes against mainstream, nationalistic, curated representations of the colonial past and is not alone in doing so.

Unlike in previous representations of the colonial past delineated with clear distinctions between colonized and colonizer, in this film the colonized Korean and colonizing Japanese characters and their mores intermingle fluidly, and such a co-mingling occurs other similar postmillennial productions. Kwon analyzes, on a formal level, the steps taken to reach this breaching of clear boundaries between colonizer/colonized. She goes not only into diverse areas of filmmaking such as character depictions and dubbing, but also traces the circulation of Japan's cultural imports in South Korea during the Cold War.

Conclusion

I appreciate the relational approach to understanding colonial cinema and coloniality at large present in this edited volume. It is in line with Chen Kuan-Hsing's "Asia as Method" influential methodology that invites decolonization efforts in the fields of culture, knowledge production, and the psyche from both the colonized and the colonizer, to achieve reconciliation. Likewise, it favors historically grounded analyses over general abstract theorizations [9]. Theorizing in this way contributes to decolonizing my own field of studies. It brings to light important theoretical film developments in Asia that are not as well-known as Western theoretical developments. It reframes the study of colonial cinema by finding connections between cinemas—between Western and Asian cinemas and inter-Asian cinemas. And it uses a more porous approach than can be expected from relying on established dichotomies. This book's invitation to revisit Asian archives could bring enormous benefits for the understanding of colonial cinemas and coloniality at large. This collection's theoretical advancement not only expands the understanding of the periods and films studied in it, but is applicable to the study of other colonial and neocolonial periods.

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Notes

- [1] Nayoung Aimee Kwon, Takushi Odagiri, and Moonim Baek, eds. *Theorizing Colonial Cinema: Reframing Production, Circulation, and Consumption of Film in Asia*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022, 14. [return to page 1]
- [2] Stoler, Anna Laura. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016; Grieverson, Lee, and Colin MacCabe. *Empire and Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011a, and *Film and the End of Empire*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011b.
- [3] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, London: Routledge, 1994.
- [4] Theorizing Colonial Cinema, 117. [return to page 2]
- [5] Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market*, London: BFI, 1985.
- [6] Fredric Jameson, A Singular Modernity, London: Verso, 2002, 165, 169.
- [7] Theorizing Colonial Cinema, 251.
- [8] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History." In *Selected Writings: 1938—1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Others, 4:389—400. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003.
- [9] Chen Kuan-Hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Tehran's official poster. Tamar is standing underneath Azadi Tower in Tehran. In the image of Tamar one can notice the smoke of explosions reflected in her sunglasses. In the reflection, we can also locate Milad (or Tehran) Tower. Tamar in the show never manages to succeed in her mission that would result in the explosions depicted in this promotional image, nor does she ever visit the Azadi Tower, the implicit threat to Iranian culture and sovereignty exemplified in this image looms large over the show.

"Once you're in, there's no way out." Tehran and the politics of erasure

by Anisa Hosseinnezhad

"From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work."

- Edward W. Said, Orientalism (284)

Tehran (2020) is an Israeli espionage-thriller television series created by Moshe Zonder, writer and producer of the Netflix series, *Fauda* (2015). The *Tehran* series originally ran on the Israeli state-owned channel Kan 11, and first aired in Israel on June 22nd, 2020. Apple bought the show released it on Apple TV+ on September 25th as an original series. I first learned about the show through a promotional email I received: "Weekend Watch: *Tehran*, your new spy obsession, is now playing on Apple TV+."



Lose yourself in the new spy thriller on Apple TV+.

Tamar is a Mossad hacker-agent who infiltrates Tehran under a false identity to help destroy Iran's nuclear reactor. But when her mission fails and she's trapped in a new life, Tamar must plan an operation that will place everyone dear to her in jeopardy.

Watch Episodes 1-3

This image was attached to the promotional email I received from Apple. Under the Apple TV logo on the top right corner, it read's "Once you're in, there's no way out". This sentiment echoes throughout the show signaling the sentiments of entrapment that the Iranians in the show feel about the situation within their country and the similar entrapment Tamar, an Israeli spy, finds herself in. Though Tamar's mobility is portrayed to be a much more feasible

feat than the Iranian's she meets in Iran.

The image attached to the email portrays the protagonist, Tamar Robinyan, an Israeli Mossad hacker and agent who travels to Tehran under a false identity with the mission to destroy Iran's supposed nuclear reactor. She stands below the Tehran landmark Azadi Tower and museum. Smoke from explosions is reflected in her sunglasses. In the reflection, we can also see Milad (or Tehran) Tower, the 24th-tallest freestanding structure in the world, and a monument of national pride for Iranians. The image puts explosions in close proximity to Iranian cultural sites. To me, it brings to mind the now deleted tweets of U.S. President Donald Trump in the aftermath of Ghasem Soleimani's assassination by the U.S. military in January of 2020. He was speaking to the possibility of Iran's retaliation:

"Targeted 52 Iranian sites...some at a very high level and important to Iran and the Iranian culture, and those targets, and Iran itself, will be hit very fast and very hard." [1] [open endotes in new window]



....targeted 52 Iranian sites (representing the 52 American hostages taken by Iran many years ago), some at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture, and those targets, and Iran itself, WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD. The USA wants no more threats!

5:52 PM · Jan 4, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

57.3K Retweets 233.1K Likes

The now deleted tweet thread of the former U.S. President Donald Trump, in the aftermath of Ghasem Soleimani's Unjust assassination. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif responded in his own tweet, warning that such strikes would violate international law.

Though Tamar never succeeds in her mission or cause the explosions depicted in this promotional image, nor does she ever visit the Azadi Tower, such implicit threat to Iranian culture and sovereignty looms large over the show.



Due to strong sanctions against the Iranian Government and the Iranian people, Apple products cannot be sold in Iran directly. However independent dealers buy Apple products offshore and sell them in Iran. This image portrays one of the many dupe Apple stores in Tehran.



Painted Murals of Ruhollah Khomeini (Former Supreme Leader of Iran), 1979 revolutionary leaders, and Martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war, are a common site in Iranian streets. *Tehran* (2020) was filmed in Athens. To bear witness to Khomeini's Mural in Athens, a city in an EU country, is an extraordinary juxtaposition. After the revolution and return of Khomeini from his British exile, most of the EU nations and the global north, enforced a harsh economic blockade on Iran and Iranians.



Throughout the series, there are short location shots with lower resolution and a shaky camera. These images seem to be filmed in Iran. This one in particular, is supposed to present Tehran; however it is Isfahan, a city in central Iran. On the top left corner, we get a glimpse of Si-o-sepol bridge.

Tehran was set to be released globally through Apple TV+ at the end of September. However, Apple's definition of global excludes many countries, including Iran. According to Apple's own website, residents from 166 countries can access Apple's app store and products. Amongst the 28 countries with no access are Syria, North Korea, Sudan, Cuba, Libya, Palestine, and Iran, many of which face sanctions from the United States.[2] Due to sanctions, Apple products are not sold directly in Iran though they are imported by independent vendors.

Until recently Apple users in Iran had access to the Apple App Store. However, on March 15th, 2018, Apple implemented a total block of traffic coming from the country and iPhone users in Iran discovered that they were no longer able to access the app store.[3] Such exclusion of Iran and Iranians from access to globally distributed products is nothing new. Ironically, a lack of access to *Tehran* by the viewers who are also its most depicted subjects calls into question capitalist definitions of the global and serves as a reminder of the hollowness of the show's proclaimed multiculturalism in its production and distribution.

That is, *Tehran* claims to be a multinational, multicultural production. In response to an interview question "How real is *Tehran* the show?" Shaun Toub, the Iranian-American actor who plays an Iranian military agent in *Tehran*, declared,

"we have been blessed to be a part of three different cultures...(the show) was a love fest that came together and the world will enjoy the series."[4]

Unsurprisingly, Toub's response does not give any insight into the reality or authenticity of *Tehran* nor any explanation of its situation or setting. Instead the show's espoused multinationalism becomes here an empty signifier of authenticity. The show's multinational and cultural quality was emphasized time and again in interviews by the producers, actors, and creators of the show. Filmed in Greece and Israel with a cast that is a mix of Iranian diasporic and emerging Israeli actors, and funded by Israel, U.S., and Canada, the show is indeed a multicultural, multinational "love fest." One country exempted from this lovefest feels very present, however—Iran and the Iranians who there.

I want to speak about *Tehran* as a cultural product, and the conflict between its proposed transnationalism, and its exclusion of likely the most central nation in the show: Iran. I will study the two competing "nationals" implicated in *Tehran*'s "transnationalism Israeli nationalism and Iranian nationalism. I see a *performance* of Iranian nationalism that results from the show's erasure of Iranian nationals—from its inception through its distribution. This erasure, packaged under the narrative auspice of curiosity and authenticity, results in an imagined performance of Iranian nationalism. It enacts a political imaginary vital to the continuation of western imperial plans for the region. As I explore how a U.S., Canadian, and Israeli-funded show imagines and performs the nationalism of their adversary, Iran, I hope to examine how this portrayal reveals that imperial perspective itself.

In addition to its espionage action line, *Tehran* represents the mobility of Iranian citizens, austerity in Iranian society, and repression of the Iranian government, particularly as it relates to land control and mobility. These scripted aspects of Iran are not a glimpse into the reality of Iran or Iranian nationalism. Instead, they are a product of and a clear glimpse into how the show's producers perceive the realities of their own nation, Israel. When *Tehran* attempts to depict the reality of Iranian repression and nationalism, the show runners instead return to Israel's own violence and project it onto their imagination of Iran. My reading does not exempt the Iranian government from their own austerity and repression; however, it allows us to find nuances in a geopolitical situation in which no

nuance is allowed. Though I plan to analyze the show on a textual and ideological level, I also hope to use *Tehran* as a case study to examine broader issues of Iranian sovereignty amidst the global distribution of U.S. media and culture. **[08]**



Iran Hostage Crisis student demonstration, Washington, D.C. (1979) Source: Marion Trikosko/ Library of Congress. No known restrictions on publication. Though the Anti-Iranian sentiments did not start with the 1979 Iranian revolution, the hostage crisis of 79 shed a light on the extent of the racism against Iranians in the west.

"To write about the one who's supposed to be my enemy"

A fascination with Iran and Iranian culture runs deep in western countries. Until the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the west had free reign access to Iranian natural resources and culture. But since then, due to Iran's geopolitical position in the region, the absence of that kind of access looms large over western culture and media. In fact, this absence is the result of the total blockade of Iran through sanctions imposed by the United States and the United Nations.

Racism is also at work, and a useful tool for imperial ideology. Yousef Baker explained the reductionism at work in this kind of ideology as he spoke at the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies:

"Iranians are racialized as Muslims; the racialization of Muslims is about asserting western liberalism as a universalist ideal. The racialization of Muslims in this current conjuncture is about creating legitimacy for a neoliberal state, that is masquerading as liberal. To avoid anti-Muslim racism, many Iranians distance themselves by asserting difference such as, 'we're not Muslim or we're not bad foreigners,' and thus as a strategy to avoid racism they actually reify the very racial project that they want to avoid."[5]

In the past decade, speculations like "who are Iranians?" and "what is their country like?" have transitioned into a new rhetoric—to separate Iranian citizens from their government. Some in the Iranian diaspora, as mentioned in Baker's research, try to distance themselves from the Iranian government to avoid racism and alienation. Another important factor on a governmental level has facilitated



When Tamar lands in Imam Khomeini International Airport in Theran, she changes her identity with another woman who wishes to escape Iran. Tamar trades in her Burqa for a flight attendant suit, passes the gates and gets into a taxi that takes her to her safe house. In the Taxi, she travels through the city for the first time. In this image, We see the reflection of Milad tower in the window.



The title card of President Obama's first address to the Iranian people during Nowruz (Solar New Year). These addresses were directed to the Iranian people, marking a clear distinction between the Iranian people and their government.



Tehran (2020) opens with this scene, a plane in Amman, Jordan, is receiving its passengers. Amongst them are two Israeli civilians that unbeknownst to Mossad have boarded the plane as well as Tamar and her other Mossad colleague. From the very beginning the parameters of freedom and entrapment are mixed with anti-Islamic ideology. The Israeli woman in this image is remarking on the Arab women's hijab saying, "oh, I need a selfie with one of these women in black."



"Really they are good people, the Iranians," is what Tamar's father remarks as he opens his family photo album for Tamar's officer who visits his house for leads of where Tamar might be in Iran. Tamar's Father, himself an Iranian Jew, who left Iran, 15 years after the revolution, for Israel, justifies his longing for the country he was born in by stating the goodness inherent in the Iranian people. In Tehran (2020), even nostalgia for the land needs to accompany the separation of the people from their government to give the nostalgic sentiment validity.

this rhetorical change—and in large helped solidify it in the eyes of the western public—has been the governmental address from around the world to the Iranian public that differentiates between the people living in Iran and the Islamic Republic that governs them.

Former U.S. President Barack Obama started this form of presidential address in 2009. Though his first address during Nowruz (Iranian New Year) was directed to Iranians and the Iranian government, it was nonetheless titled as just "The President's Message to the Iranian People." [6] By the last years of his presidency, Obama directed his address to only Iranian citizens and Iranian-American Patriots, as he called them. In fact, these addresses opened up political discussions between the two countries, one that according to some resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or better known as the Iran Nuclear Deal. At the same time, Obama's rhetoric helped further separate the Iranian public from their government in the eyes of the west.

This binary overview of Iranian society has serious consequences. It is a dangerous outlook, one that helps to solidify the already racist and anti-Muslim rhetoric so prevalent in western societies. This binary sees Iranians who advocate for the sovereignty of their country, who speak out against foreign invasion, and who (sometimes but not always) are Muslim, as supporting the Islamic Republic of Iran's repression, and it labels them as government puppets.

This contrast between differentiation and binary ideology is the spirit with which the creators of *Tehran* approached the show. In an interview Moshe Zonder, one of the creators of the show, referred to his intentions for creating a show about Iran as follows.

"For me, I wanted to write about Iran for years because it's always interesting to me to cross borders physically and mentally, and to write about the one who's supposed to be my enemy, the one supposed to, you know, kill me. To understand the narrative of the other tribe this was fascinating and exciting." [7]

Dana Eden, the co-creator of the show in the same interview, refers to their vision of the show as follows,

"This show is all about humanity. We really wanted to show the other side of Iran, outside of politics, outside of the regime. We wanted to show the world of young people, of the culture, of the music, of the human beings who want to be free. I think that we really tried to make an authentic glimpse into the current Iranian culture." [8]

The show's actors and producers emphasize they are showing the other side of Iran and Iranian culture, separating the show from politics, and the people of Iran from their governing body. That they frequently mention this separation of *Tehran*'s premise from politics is of course ironic. The script and dramatic action are built entirely around the very political rhetoric of Iran as a nuclear threat. In that way *Tehran*'s apolitical narrative and ethos are uncomfortably close Netenyahu's and the Israeli government's. Nonetheless, the show's presumed separation from politics and the Iranian government gives an aura of authenticity to *Tehran*'s depiction of Iran and Iranians.

When reviewed in the western media, *Tehran* was mostly praised for having a nuanced and authentic view of Iran. Magazines like *Foreign Policy* called it a "nuanced, sometimes humorous,"[9] show about the Israel-Iran relation: "Flouts Stereotypes."[10] John Powers, in his article on National Public Radio (NPR), wrote that *Tehran* "pointedly avoids reducing Iranians to monsters, carefully

making a distinction between the people and their government."[11] In that way, western media's enthusiastic praise of the show and its creators brings to mind their reception of *Fauda*, another show produced and written by Moshe Zonder. Much like *Tehran*, *Fauda* was received with enthusiasm in the United States for its nuanced depiction of the Israel-Palestine conflict.





Another low resolution, shaky image of Tehran. The quality of these real pictures is poor in contrast to the crisp and high quality reproductions of Tehran in Athens. Mixed with the fake Tehran built by the Israeli creators in Athens, these images, though short in length, add to the fear and tension built into the show.

This image was taken from the The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement's website and their article on the Anti-Arab, warmongering nature of Fauda (2015) created by Moshe Zonder, the creator of *Tehran. Fauda* much like *Tehran* was received with enthusiasm for its nuanced reading of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, the show was heavily criticized by the Palestinian-led movement Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and many other Middle Eastern news outlets. BDS activists released a statement about *Fauda*, calling the show an "anti-Arab racist, Israeli propaganda tool that glorifies the Israeli military's war crimes against the Palestinian people."[12]

Interestingly, amidst all this, unlike the spy thrillers of the early 2000s, *Tehran* does not reduce its enemy to monsters and faceless characters. In a review of the show for NPR, John Powers writes,

"Tehran makes it clear that the Mossad is capable of unsavory violence, and it pointedly avoids reducing Iranians to monsters, carefully making a distinction between the people and their government." [13]

One could commend the creators for not reducing Iranians to mere villains but note how once again, the critic returns to the phrase: "carefully making a distinction between the people and their government." However, I do find the complexity of charater development important in terms of representation. For example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) agent, Kamali, played by Shawn Toub, is one of the most well-received characters in the show. And he is shown as caught between his devotion to his duty as a government agent and his devotion to his wife receiving cancer treatment, who is then kidnapped by Mossad.

Powers compares and likens Kamali's internal struggle to that of the Mossad agent Tamar, who feels conflicted about Mossad's brutal treatment of her Iranian hacker friend. However, for a viewer to make this comparison and to appreciate Tamar's mournfulness, as Power's describes it, only gets us so far. The agent's capacity for such mournfulness serves to legitimate her mission which, as the creators acknowledge, has a deep parallel to the actual destruction of Iranian infrastructure of by the Israeli state. Further, much of the brutality of Mossad that she reacts to, the minutiae of the mission (versus its broader goals) is then scripted to be the responsibility of her handler and mentor who we come to find out is an double agent for Iran. Even when the show depicts the brutality of Mossad, the narrative line makes Iran ultimately responsible for that.



An image of Mossad's intelligence room where most of Tamar's commands come from. Mossad's technology is portrayed to be much more developed than their Iranian counterpart. In the show, whenever Mossad's operation room is portrayed, it is high tech, with a blue hue, filled with computers, and big screens.





Faraz Kamali (played by Shaun Toub) is the head of Investigations of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of Iran in the show. His character is complex, with humility, desire, and at times an unquestioned patriotism and national loyalty. One of the ways in which Kamali's character is set apart from other Iranian men in the show, is his relationship with his wife, a secular woman. He jokes with his wife, ends the phone conversations with kisses, and is openly intimate. His character stands in contrast to the portrayal of other Iranian men who see women as objects.

Yael Kadosh was an Israeli Mossad agent who served as Tamar Rabinyan's commanding officer and handler, overseeing Rabinyan's deep cover operation in Tehran. Kadosh was a double agent working for the Iranian government. In the last episode, her cover is blown and she tries to kill Tamar. Her meddling in the operation is what leads to the failure of Tamar's mission. Instead of having the Israeli Fighter Jets pass the Iranian border unnoticed to blow up the Iranian nuclear facilities, the Iranian military shoot the jets down.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Repression of religious minorities in Iran is a serious human rights issue. *Tehran* represents a unique Jewish-Iranian experience and does it quite well. The show represents a clear picture of nostalgia and the effects of forced exile, detailing the tensions of exodus and the longing for the motherland. This history of repression however, runs much deeper in regards to the Iranian Jewish community. Though Iran still stands as a country home to the largest Jewish community in the middle east outside of Israel, more than 90% of the Iranian Jewish community fled the country after Iran's 1979 revolution, and the community is constantly shrinking due to constant repression and economic and social hardship.[14] [open endnotes in new window] It is also important to note that Iran has a long history of antisemitism including the anti-semitic policies of the current government.





"One eye looks out to Jerusalem and the other to Isfahan," Tamar's father says in the show, as he articulates the nostalgia he feels for Iran and the complications of being an Iranian-Jew.

In search of a safe house, Tamar connects with her long lost aunt. She has converted to Islam and her husband works in the Iranian judicial system. Her aunt is reluctant to house her, and when she takes her in, she introduces Tamar as one of her past students.



"They destroyed the country with the regime of theirs," say Karim, one of the young Iranians Tamar encounters, during his speech to start up the protest in what is supposed to be Tehran University. He is part of the so-called secular-reformists in the show, yet his sentiments are not just reformist, they are strictly anti-government in all forms.

Previously, the Jewish community of Iran during Pahlavi monarchy and the Qajar dynasty, for example, faced repression and were not granted full and equal rights as citizens. *Tehran* largely does a good job of representing the experience of Iran's Jewish diaspora. Where it fails, however, is in representing the experience of religious minorities who remain within the Iranian polity.

Terhan scripts Iranian politics as emanating from a singular regime, and the only political opposition can be total rebellion and overthrow of the government. The show fails to represent the ethnic and religious diversity that, although shrinking, still exists and affects the fabric of Iranian society. The Jewish community in Iran is one of the only religious minorities that holds a seat in the parliament, and thus this community's presence is a vital avenue of resistance for other religious minorities like Christians, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is of Iran. Tehran's erasure of Iran's racial or religious minorities stands in opposition to the show's creators' attempt to portray an authentic image of the Iranian society. Even more important, the show's creators seem ignorant of the role that the Iranian Jewish community who still reside in Iran plays in any hopes of liberation for other minorities there. This erasure has serious consequences for the ways in which the show views the possibility of liberation for Iranians, one that is only possible with foreign invasion.

Mobility for some, captivity for many

In the show's first episode Tamar enters Iran through Tehran's Imam Khomeini's



The first time we see Tamar in the show, she is hidden under hijab and burqa posing as a muslim woman traveling from Amman, Jordan to Delhi, India. It's her hijab that allows her to change identity with an Iranian woman in Tehran's airport and set foot on the Iranian soil unnoticed.



Here we can see as Tamar and her fellow Mossad agent pass the gates, the other two Israelis on the plane get taken away by the police to be questioned.



Mobility in Tehran is uneven. Israeli agents roam the borders freely, as sentiments of entrapment are expressed by the Iranians that are portrayed in the show. Kadosh, portrayed in this image, decides to go to Iran to help Tamar in her mission. In less than 12 hours, she enters the Israeli safe house in Tehran.

airport. Tamar and another Mossad agent are passengers on a flight from Amman, Jordan, to Delhi, India. When the flight, due to faked technical difficulties, performs an emergency landing in Tehran, Tamar and her companion comfortably pass the gates and checkpoints on Iranian soil.

Tamar is wearing hijab, a burqa and Chador, which covers her body and face, and the other Mossad agent is a bearded man who holds a tasbih (Islamic prayer beads) in his hands. Their embodied image of a Muslim couple is juxtaposed to another Israeli couple who unbeknownst to Mossad have boarded the aircraft in Jordan. As the two Israeli citizens get taken away by the Iranian security agents, Tamar and the other Mossad agent pass through the gates and blend in with other passengers in the airport.

In *Tehran*, disguised as Muslims, Mossad agents enter Iran with no friction. Towards the end of the series, Tamar's commander, Kadosh, decides to leave Tel Aviv for Iran to assist Tamar in her mission. Less than 12 hours later, Kadosh is at the Israeli safe house in Tehran. This frictionless mobility in *Tehran* is afforded to Mossad agents when they embody the perceived image of a Muslim Iranian.

In contrast to Tamar's fluid mobility stands the feeling of entrapment expressed by the Iranians she meets through her journey. In *Tehran*, when mobility is afforded to an Iranian citizen, it is mainly to military officials and their family. Iranians—even when they behave secularly, join artist co-ops, and go to parties in the mountains—won't be allowed the mobility afforded to Tamar. In contrast, their secular daily life only shows their further entrapment within the Islamic republic of Iran.

On the other hand, the hijab has different connotations when it's wearer is an Iranian instead of an Israeli. That the show can use the hijab as a narrative tool and a costume for an agent in disguise implies a violence done to women—an ideological notion that Muslim woman embody two identities: one under the covers of their religiously mandated rule of hijab, and one when they are free from it. This fraught duality of one's identity further exacerbates the entrapment of the Iranian woman. More specifically, it "entraps" Iranian Muslim woman's image, making her mobility even less imaginable than the male counterpart of her society. This uneven depiction of mobility where Israeli agents can enter and exit Iran with ease while wearing hijab, is contrasted with the show's depiction of the entrapment of Iranians within their country and scripture of their faith. For the Israeli spies in the show the Islamic religious iconography is a symbol of freedom, while for the Iranians depicted in the show it's a symbol of entrapment.

The United States and the west more broadly have outraised Iran from the rest of the world due to its nuclear thread. This geopolitical reality is one of the primary reasons used to isolate Iran and its citizen from the rest of the world. Iranians not only have been blocked from being able to easily exchange ideas with the countries in the global north (most of the Iranian scientist and scholars are still unable to publish papers and attend international conferences due to sanctions and blockades), due to extreme visa requirements and anti-Muslim sentiments, visiting countries in the European Union and United States specifically, even as a tourist is a hard feat only possible for the rich and wealthy.

Anti-war activists and anti-imperialist investigative journalists like Gareth Porter,



This is the first time that Tamar enters the Iranian underground scene. After the protest at Tehran University, She goes to an afterparty with her Iranian contact Milad. Here the imagination of the Israeli creators of what a, "Real," Iran looks like, comes to the fore. An Iranian youth culture filled with drugs, music, and what freedom means from a western view.



Halfway through the show, Tamar has a chance to escape Iran for good. On her way to the airport she hears the on the radio speeches from Iranian government officials threatening Tel Aviv and Israel. These speeches prompt her to stay and complete her mission.



One of the other real images of Tehran that are trickled throughout the show. These images give an air of authenticity and authority to the show.

have warned us about this view of Iran that regards it as a nuclear threat. In an interview with *Aljazeera*, Porter explains the origin for one of the most important documents that points to Iran's plans for building a nuclear bomb. He says that information about Iran's nuclear capacity is ambiguous at best:

"The most important set of documentary evidence is the so-called "laptop" documents. Those were documents that were supposedly [smuggled out] from a covert Iranian nuclear weapons research programme in the early 2000s, but I was able to show in my book (*Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*) that these documents were in fact passed on to Western intelligence by the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK), who of course were sworn enemies of the regime." [15]

According to the Arms control association, the United States and Israel combined, hold 5640 nuclear warheads, with Israel, holding 90 warheads within its borders. Due to the supposed nuclear activity of the Iranian government, the nation and its people have been under harsh sanctions and coercive measures enacted by other countries for the past 43 years. It's important to remind the readers of this essay that Iranian government stayed in and abided by the rules of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), more commonly known as the Iran Nuclear deal, even after the U.S. President Donald Trump left the negotiations and reinstated even harsher sanctions on the country. The negative effects of those economic coercive measures now reverberate in the times of COVID 19 pandemic that has resulted in massive deaths for Iranians.

Any conversation about the Iranian nuclear capabilities should also include understanding sanctions. Here it is prudent to remember Madeleine Albright, the Secretary of State during the Clinton administration, and the U.S. government's position on sanctions against Iraq and the demise that followed. In May 1996 Madeleine Albright, who was then the U.S. ambassador to the UN, was asked by *60 Minutes* correspondent Lesley Stahl, in reference to years of U.S.-led economic sanctions against Iraq:

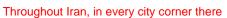
"We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that is more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?"

Albright's answer to the question was simply:

"I think that is a very hard choice, but the price, we think, the price is worth it."

The U.S. government for years has had this position towards many countries of the global south. This reflection does not absolve the countries affected by sanctions of the crimes they have committed but should lead us to remember that in the end, it is always the people who live within those borders who are affected by the material consequences of economic coercive measures.







When Tamar is driving through Tehran for

are alms boxes for people to donate money to. In Iran most travelers put money in the alms box before a trip to ask for a safe trip. The production designer of Tehran, Yoel Herzberg in an interview with The National News Art and Culture, remarked that he watched Iranian cinema for inspiration. These included the documentaries Writing on the City and We Skate In Iran, as well as the feature films No One Knows About Persian Cats and Raving Iran, each of which he described as, "poetic and eyeopening." Though many of his interpretations and cultural amalgamations are unpalatable for me, the inclusion of alms boxes were a nostalgic detail for me.

the first time, She sees a hanging of a man in the city square. The Taxi driver tells her that his crime was oil embezzlement. This violent image has lost its stark injustice by its reproduction in U.S. media. The conversation that follows this violent image, centers around the economic hardship with the Iranian government as the sole contributor to the Iranians' immiseration. The harsh and crippling sanctions, put on Iranians by the western countries never enters the political lexicon of the show.



The cab driver, who drives Tamar from the airport to her safehouse, is the first Iranian she meets and has a conversation with. Yet we never see his face. He corrects his mirror to take a look at Tamar as he starts a conversation with her, which heightens the tension and our feeling of unease for her safety.



Halfway through the show, Tamar has a chance to escape Iran for good. On her way to the airport

Tehran's overarching narrative, however, relies on imminent danger. The script projects the definite existence and threat of the Iranian nuclear weapon program. The show also clearly dismisses the damage done by sanctions and other coercive economic measures. In an early scene, as Tamar drives in a cab through the streets of Tehran she witnesses the hanging of an Iranian citizen. In fact, such a violent image conveys little sense of its stark injustice because of its constant reproduction in U.S. media and video games like *Call of Duty* in their portrayal of bad Arabs—or in this case Iranians. At that point she has a conversation with the cab driver about the so-called nuclear deal.

The cab driver states his lack of faith in the deal. He does not worry about the sanctions that isolate him and his countrymen from the world at large, since he does not view his economic hardship as a product of the U.S. backed sanctions, but instead he sees that hardship as originating from the inherent corruption and incapability of the Iranian government. We never see the cab driver's face except the reflection of his eyes in the rear view mirror of the car. Instead we are positioned close to Tamar, as if we as viewers, like her, just arrived in Tehran.

The cab driver is one the first Iranian citizens who Tamar has an encounter with, but his sentiments and politics seem to be copied onto virtually every Iranian character whom Tamar meets and connects with. It is through these encounters, visual and narrative, that the Iranian public becomes a legitimizing fiction, a vehicle via which Tamar's own nationalist agenda gets reaffirmed. Halfway through the series, she has the chance to flee Iran for Israel. On her way back to the airport, she thinks back on the suffering she has witnessed and sees posters celebrating nuclear weapons, something far from reality for any Iranian. This makes her change her mind and return back to the her Iranian lover to finish the job that Mossad wants her to do. In this way the script not only has its protagonist reaffirm as her own the Israeli nationalist agenda, but it also concludes that the only route for survival for Iranian citizens and the world at large is foreign intervention and in this case, Israeli intervention in Iran with covert bombings.

she hears the on the radio speeches of Iranian government officials threatening Tel Aviv and Israel. These speeches prompt her to stay and complete her mission. She also witnesses this poster that roughly translates to "The nuclear weapon power is a non-negotiable power". Both of these sentiments cement the unchallenged and un-nuanced view of the show's creators on the Iranian nuclear capability and ambitions.



As the two Israeli civilians enter Iranian soil, they are greeted by the pictures of Imam Khomeini, the revolutionary leader of Iran, and Imam Khamenei, the current supreme leader of Iran.



Another scene in *Tehran* that seems to be filmed in the real Iran. Here we can see Iranian made cars like Period from Pars Khodro. Iran does export its cars but mainly to Syria, Iraq, and other neighboring countries of the global south.



In *Tehran*, the protestors chant, "Freedom of thought is a human right." This chant was one the most popular slogans of the 2009 green revolution in Iran in the aftermath of Ahmadinejad's second presidential election.

The uncritical acceptance of such a hegemonic narrative is not just seen in a character in a TV show *Tehran*, this media narrative has influenced Americans and virtually most citizens of the global north for the past 43 years. Currently, in this time of heightened tensions that put Iran and Iranians on the brink of war, we need to re-examine this fraught and regurgitated image of Iran.

Tehran the real

Tehran, according to its creators, fluidly walks the line between reality and fiction both in its narrative and in its imagery. The show uses footage shot in the streets of Tehran and mixes it with the imaginary *Tehran* built in Athens. At first viewing, it might be difficult to parse those images apart. For example, most non Iranian viewers might not understand the significance of seeing Perid or Pezho, two Iranian-made cars, in the streets that look similar to Tehran's.

The mixture of actual and fictional footage of Iranian streets is significant in a show that is projecting the ethos of "just" espionage and sabotage, i.e., that a spider web of Israeli spies and allies live in Iran who are active in covert operations. This genre production, within today's political climate between the two countries, cannot be seen as just a marketable ploy to captivate an audience. This image mix of fabrication and documentary, read at a time of heightened tension between the two countries, embody a different texture, far away from just an innovative cinematic gesture. Made by Israeli producers, the images project dominance over the narrative that *Tehran* is presenting of the current political situation between Iran and Israel, and project a feeling of insecurity for Iranian viewers.

In addition, *Tehran* is filled with symbolic imagery that stands testimony to its creators' familiarity with events in Iran. For many viewers abroad, these images lose their significance once they are reproduced and used as a narrative element. However, a close reading of them is important as is understanding the significance of their displacement. For example, Daniel Syrkin, the co-creator and director of the show, in an interview talked about the elements of reality that were implemented in the show. He said,

"I didn't know much about Iran before I started working on *Tehran*. Working on *Tehran* and learning Farsi, I learned about the deep and amazing culture. Full of poetry, amazing cinema. I learned that Iranian people are one of the most literate people on earth.....also what I really learned that was interesting was about the young people of Iran. So, we started watching TV shows and movies from Iran and just regular youtube clips of young people. I found out that there is a whole culture of skaters in Iran, something you would have never imagined. Or people who go out on raves in the desert to listen to western music. And this is something I would love people to learn from Iran, and we showed it, we used all of those elements to create our thriller. It's not a national geographic show, it's an espionage thriller. But watching it you learn so much about Iran."[16]

Syrkin is right. *Tehran* is filled with symbolic imageries that signify our overconsumption of a specific kind of anti-government media that is projected outside of Iran. Throughout the eight-episode series, we see a lot of protest footage and slogans of freedom. In fact, for any Iranian like myself who lived through the 2009 uprising, these are eerily familiar, images of young women asking for equality and defying the rule of hijab, and indeed raves and underground parties. Contrary to what one might think, although these images seem positive, they are also highly ideological, basing their appeal on a generalized humanitarianism.





When the creators of *Tehran* want to show the real Iran in the show, they rely on the underground parties and raves in the mountain, where young people dance, use drugs, and create microcosms of what freedom means from the creator's perspective.

The protest portrayed in *Tehran* looks like a joke for anyone who has been involved in recent protests in Iran or the 2009 green revolution protest in the aftermath of Ahmadinejad's second term election. There are no consequences visible for the protesters, and the stakes are ideological rather than real material issues, caused by sanctions and mismanagement of the government. In recent years, the protests that caused many deaths in Iran were organized originally by working class people and farmers.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Tehran is filled with symbolic imagery that points mainly to critique of the government. Due to the erasure of Iranians who live in Iran from the production and distribution of the show, these reproduced images lose the very critical aspect the creators of the show desperately want to portray. This image is the reproduction of the, "Girl of Revolution street," which started a new wave of feminism in Iran that challenges the mandatory rule of hijab.



Vida Movahed. Enghelab street, Tehran, Iran, 2017. The original girl of revolution street, Vida Movahed, was the first of many women across Iran who started the movement for equality in 2017. In a symbolic act, she stood on top of a telecommunications box, holding her white headscarf on a stick in Enghelab(revolution) street in Tehran, in protest against Iran's mandatory hijab rules. Although Movahed herself was initially released on bail, many who followed her footsteps were not. These women were imprisoned and silenced by the government.

These reproduced images embody an erasure of Iranians rather than a representation of a citizenry's defiance. The nature of their reproduction heightens their anti-governmental ethos; within *Tehran* that ethos is inherently connected with upholding foreign intervention and war. Contrary to what foreign viewers might interpret, that image of the Iranian woman holding her white scarf while standing on top of a car stands like a thorn in the eye of any Iranian who is familiar with what that image is representing. Let me explain.

In May 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump announced U.S. plans to leave Iran's nuclear deal. In a White House briefing he said, "the heart of the Iran deal was a giant fiction: that a murderous regime desired only a peaceful nuclear energy program." In August of the same year, Iranians took to the streets, protesting the economic hardships they faced as a result of the crippling sanctions that followed. The demonstrations were met with brutal suppression by the Iranian government; many were killed, and hundreds imprisoned. Amid protests, a group of Iranian women took to the streets demanding the lift of the hijab rule, calling it an unequal treatment of the women of the country. Though the movement received momentum and attention from foreign countries during the 2018 protests, Iranian women have been advocating for their rights since before the revolution.

During the 2018 protest, women from all ages, ethnic and racial backgrounds stood in the streets took their head scarf up in the sky and posted a picture of their disobedience in the social media, hashtagging it #Womansrights, #equality, and #GirlsofRevolutionStreet. The original girl of revolution street, Vida Movahed, was the first of many women across Iran who started the movement for equality in 2017. In a symbolic act, she stood on top of a telecommunications box, holding her white headscarf on a stick in Enghelab (revolution) street in Tehran, in protest against Iran's mandatory hijab rules.[17] [open endnotes in new window] Though Movahed herself was initially released on bail, many who followed her footsteps were not. These women were imprisoned and silenced by the government. Movahed was later sentenced to a year in prison. This movement did not include only Iranian women, many Iranian men across the country joined in protests and faced brutal consequences.

In *Tehran*, this image is reproduced amidst an imaginary protest in Tehran university, against the hardline dress codes that the university set up for the students. Tamar is roped into the protests because her contact, Milad (who becomes her future love interest and assists her in hacking the Iranian intelligence services), strongly supports the women. In opposition to the reformists and those opposed to the government stand anti-reformist protesters who chant anti-zionist anti-U.S. slogans. Tamar is standing amid fast cuts between the two side. Tension is high in this scene not only due to this comical rendition of protest, but because we know that people who are after Tamar are in proximity. In the midst of this chaos, a young girl stands on top of a car, holding her symbolic white scarf in her hand in protest. Suddenly the music is louder, and the scene is slowed down. As Tamar runs away from this chaos, police and hard liners try to catch the woman on top of the car, but the protesters oppose them. We leave the scene, witnessing the beating of the man who tried to pull her off the car by the reformists.





In the midst of the slow motion protest Tamar stands. The tension in this scene is high not due to the realistic depiction of the protest itself but because we know that two men are after Tamar.

As mentioned above the rendition of protest in Tehran is almost comical. Another aspect of this rendition that is interesting is that in Tehran acts of disobedience come with no consequences. A contradiction that seems counter intuitive to the creator's position towards the Iranian government.

Later in the story, we meet the same young woman who was on the top of the car. The setting is at a party, her politics—much like the cab driver's—are a projection of the creators' political stance towards Iran. She hates the government, feels trapped, and wishes for a westernized Iran. However, by the time we meet her again in the series, we have forgotten her image, standing on top of the car, reproducing a disingenuous image of an actual act of defiance. In reality, that act did not end in victory for the women who held her scarf high in defiance of the law but bore no consequence. Thus, in the TV show the sentiments of a collective movement of Iranian women asking for equality are boiled down to a narrative tool.

In *Tehran*, the nuances of Iran, with its amazing ethnic and religious diversity, have been boiled down to binary politics: those who rule vs. those who revolt. It is within this binary that Tamar finds her place and a homecoming as an Iranian-born Israeli. Tamar's identity becomes a narrative point of tension. Though she physically can blend in, Tamar herself does not believe in or rely on her Iranian heritage. Even when she meets with her now-Muslim long-lost aunt, she feels and acts like an outsider. Halfway through the series a shift happens.

The setting is isolated. Tamar is sitting on a rock in the mountains away from a rave, looking at Tehran's skyline. Milad, an Iranian hacker and future asset, approaches her and convinces Tamar that selling ecstasy to unemployed recent graduates is not an act of bad faith, but a remedy for their lost hopes. Tamar then looks over the city's skyline and tells Milad that it is for them—the young, the hopeful, the college educated masters and Doctors—that they need to black out the city. The dialogue, as implied in Syrkin's interview, assumes that all the college educated youth in Iran want regime change. Though that assumption might sound promising and believable, it is a violently erroneous imaginary on the part of the liberal west. In fact, the young citizens of Iran in 2019 were in the streets demanding not a hegemonic regime change, but economic relief. Furthermore, in this plotline, it is only when Milad gives away part of his own national sovereignty and agrees to blackout his city that Tamar can fully embrace her own Iranian identity.



During the rave in the mountains, as Tamar and Milad look at the skylight of Tehran, she says to him, "look at the city lights, think how amazing it's going to be to black it out." Throughout the show and with every interaction she has with Iranians, her closeness to the country and its people, reaffirms in Tamar that the only way for their salvation is foreign (and in this case Israeli) intervention.





In Episode 6 Tamar and Milad return from the rave and begin their plan to blackout the city. After an intimate foreplay, Tamar commands Milad like a dog to stay. Though this could be seen as an innocent play of lovers, due to the uneven distribution of power in the show, one can only see this as another attempt to present domination. Iranian women in the show are not awarded the same power that Tamar has. Their voice is timid and their mobility blocked.

On their way to the rave, Tamar and her friends come to a checkpoint. As mentioned in the essay, the police checkpoint is not a foreign idea for Iranians. However this rendition of the checkpoint resembles the violent Israeli border police checkpoints that limit Palestinian mobility in their ancestral land.



In the checkpoint, on the right of the road, stands a tower with a soldier in an Army uniform. There is a light machine gun, mounted on the edge, and pointed at the road. On the ground, a soldier in the same Army uniform greets the car. Milad tells the soldier that Tamar is her family from outside of Iran.

Policing the land

Before this scene, Tamar and Milad have an encounter with the Iranian Traffic Police of NAJA (NAJA). For most Iranians who travel between cities in Iran, the highway patrol is not a familiar sight. Though ultimately all the police agencies can and do report to Sepahe Pasdaran (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), a branch of the Iranian Armed Forces, checkpoints are not guarded by military guards. That is why, though in spirit the image produced in *Tehran* can have a sense of familiarity, in actuality it represents something much darker and violent.

On the road Tamar and her friends come to what looks like a checkpoint. On the right of the road stands a tower with a soldier in an Army uniform with a light machine gun mounted on the edge and pointed at the road. On the ground, a soldier in the same Army uniform greets the car. As a viewer of this scene, after looking at the image and witnessing the interaction between the police, Tamar, and her friends, I saw not a common occurrence in Iran but rather the eerie resemblance between that imagery and interaction to violent Israeli-Palestinian border police checkpoints.







Tamar and her friends pay the soldiers to buy their way through the checkpoint, insinuating again at the corruption inherent to the structure of the Iranian government.

Here, I don't want to argue that the Iranian police, who are much like the police and armed forces in any other country, should be exempt from criticism for their brutality and violent acts especially towards minorities. But I would like to look at these images as a cultural product of the Israeli creators themselves. The violence



Mehran Ghafoorian, an Iranian comedian in *How not to get a Ticket* (2018). Ghafoorian props himself up on the shoulders of the police officer, begging him to not write him a ticket. Link to video here.



A glimpse into the Iranian war room in the last episode of the show. In contrast to the modern, high technology control room of Mossad, Iranian Intelligence is shown to be stuck in the cold war era nostalgia. Minimum technology with a warmer hue.

against Palestinians within the Israeli checkpoints needs no introduction. Other than the predatory notion of their very existence, the open fire policy of Israeli armed forces has resulted in many assaults and deaths at the expense of the Palestinian people. For example, on June 23rd 2020, only a day after the premiere of *Tehran*, Ahmet Erekat, a 27-year-old Palestinian, and the nephew of Saeb Erakat, secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was murdered by the border police forces of east Jerusalem; Erekat was said to be running errands for his sister's wedding that afternoon.[18]

Let me draw a media contrast to that rendition of traffic police in *Tehran*. A 2018 short comedy skit, produced by Mehran Ghafourian an Iranian comic, called How not to get a ticket shows Ghafourian pulled over by a NAJA officer for not wearing a seatbelt. As the car pulls to the side of the road, we can hear post-revolution pop music produced in the U.S. by Hassan Shamaizadeh coming from the car. Ghafourian gets out of the window of the passenger seat and then physically props himself up on the shoulders of the police officer. The officer is wearing a NAJA uniform; it is starkly different from the military uniform in Tehran. We then see a series of negotiations between Ghafourian and the officer. He makes multiple excuses for not wearing a seatbelt such as he's a secret police agent, pregnant, or the politic commander's nephew. There are many differences between this interaction, itself a critique of policing in Iran, and the one in *Tehran*. But only one acknowledges the difference in Iran between the military and the transit police. So when confronted by the image of the border police checkpoint in Tehran, I recognized that imagery as one uniquely produced by Israeli creators as a subconscious reflection of their apartheid state falsely transferred onto another nation. And what is projected here is one's own national and most violent form of territorial violence in a seeming representation of the other.





In the Mossad control room in the last episode, as the 16 Israeli fighter jets that have illegally entered the Iranian border are getting shot down, the head of Mossad watches the failed mission on big screens.

The series ends with this image, Tamar on the back of a motorcycle with Milad on the run from the Iranian police. Though by now the nature of her mission is clear for Milad, he still follows her and the two set the scene for the upcoming season two, set to be released in May of 2022.

Conclusion

The summer of 2020 was a tumultuous time for Iran and Iranians. As COVID-19 ravaged throughout the country, leaving many dead and the healthcare system strained beyond measure, Iranians also faced many explosions coming from unknown sources across the country. These explosions took place at nuclear enrichment facilities, missile sites, petrochemical centers, power plants, and medical clinics. Most cruelly, the explosion at the medical clinic killed 19 civilians and was a catastrophic loss for a country under the crippling U.S. sanctions that has made access to the medical necessities needed for combating COVID-19 nearly impossible.

The first explosion happened only three days after the TV series *Tehran* was released in Israel. In an interview with *New York Times* about the show, Moshe Zonder called these explosions "the kind of publicity money can't buy." His said this about the explosions that ravaged Iran as *Tehran* was premiering in Israel:

"It was a bombing, and then an episode of our show, and then another bombing, and it kept going like this...Everyone reacted and said, 'Oh,



Image of the 16 Israeli fighter jets as they enter Iran's borders. Although this image might seem innocent, it has real consequences at a time when the two countries are at the brink of war.

Tamar Rabinyan is working!" [19]

Niv Sultan, the actress who plays Tamar Rabinyan in the show, had the same reaction. In a now deleted TikTok video, Sultan filmed herself as she was applying nail polish while listening to the TV news of explosions in Iran. She then gestured to herself, implying to viewers that she, from the comfort of her home, could be behind those explosions.

I did not spend time in this essay arguing whether or not Israeli spies were behind these explosions, though according to *New York Times*, "Some officials say that a joint American-Israeli strategy" could be behind these explosions. [20] However it is essential to acknowledge such stark and gleeful warmongering of *Tehran*'s creators and actors when referring to real life events, the consequences of which are almost exclusively death and injury for the Iranians whom they claim their show represents. I also believe that their response to the bombings in Iran is not a stand-alone event, separate from the show. As exemplified throughout the essay, *Tehran* is a cultural product of the stark geopolitical time that we inhabit, and as such the absence and erasure of the voices of Iranians who live in Iran is inherent to such production. When confronted with a show that *The New York Times* deems as "unabashedly entertaining," and when *Tehran* is renewed by Apple for a second season, we need to question of the ways in which Iran and Iranian sovereignty are portrayed.

The Times of Israel

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BBC News

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The Guardian

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President has said he will seek to revive the nuclear deal, but insists that Iran must first reverse its nuclear steps.





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The Hill

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Collages of the headlines regarding Iran and the Iranian Nuclear deal during Biden's first few months in power. His election was important to Iranians, as it was meant to bring some hope and ease of sanctions during the time of economic hardship for Iranians and the COVID pandemic. Biden never came back to the negotiating table.

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- 2. Linshi, How U.S. Sanctions Keep Apple's IPhones Out of Some Countries.
- 3. Cimpanu, Apple Bans Iran from the App Store.
- 4. Khilani, Actors Niv Sultan & Shaun Toub On Their Espionage Thriller 'Tehran.'
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- 6. *The President's Message to the Iranian People* YouTube, Uploaded by The Obama White House, 19 March 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY_utC-hrjI.
- 7. "TEHRAN MOSHE ZONDER & DANA EDEN INTERVIEW" YouTube, Uploaded by Bonnie Laufer Krebs, 23 Sept 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xR9YFk1BLAo
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- 11. Powers, An Israeli Agent Finds Herself Stranded In 'Tehran' In A Gripping New Spy Series.
- 12. Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). *Netflix, Time to Nix War Crimes Glorifying Series.*
- 13. Powers, An Israeli Agent Finds Herself Stranded In 'Tehran' In A Gripping New Spy Series.
- 14. Hjelmgaard, *Iran's Jewish community is the largest in the Mideast outside Israel.* [return to p. 2]
- 15. Gadzo, Is Iran Really a Nuclear Threat?
- 16. "Daniel Syrkin Interview "Tehran." YouTube, uploaded by Paul's Trip to the Movies, 12. Oct. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30I9VjGyHUs.
- 17. Kenyon, *In Iran Protests, Women Stand Up, Lift Their Hijab, For Their Rights.* [return to p. 3]
- 18. Al Jazeera, Israeli Forces Kill Palestinian at Occupied West Bank Checkpoint.
- 19. Kamin, 'Tehran' Is the Latest Israeli Thriller, Emphasis on Thrills.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



John Milius explaining how he conceived the title "Apocalypse Now." Images from *Milius* (Joey Figueroa and Zak Knutson 2013).



1969 poster for *Easy Rider*. Its text emphasizes its countercultural theme and popularity with audiences.

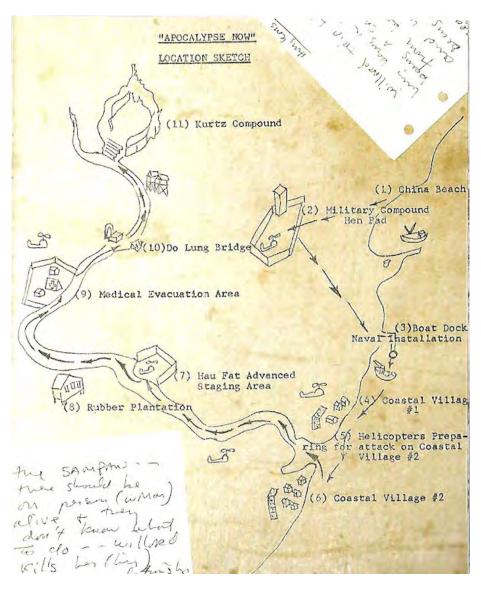
Psychedelic soldiers and tragic surfers: John Milius' "Apocalypse Now" (1969)

by Jeeshan Gazi

In November 1969, Francis Ford Coppola persuaded Warner Bros. to invest \$600,000 in his production company, American Zoetrope, to develop movies for "the youth market"—an audience that the Hollywood studios had managed to lose across the decade but that had recently returned to cinemas for the independently produced *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper 1969).[1] [open endnotes in new window] A year later, and much to the chagrin of the Warner executives who would demand their money back, Coppola would present them with George Lucas' *THX-1138*, and two screenplays: Coppola's "The Conversation" and John Milius' "Apocalypse Now." The latter was submitted to American Zoetrope on December 5th 1969, having already been in gestation for at least a year, though the film would not reach cinemas until a decade later.

Here I examine this first draft screenplay of *Apocalypse Now* and find that, like *Easy Rider*, its themes very much speak to nineteen-sixties U.S. youth in its providing a cinematic recognition of their counterculture. Dennis Hopper's film sought to reject the United States' genocidal movement across the "frontier" by reversing the direction of its motorcycle riding contemporary cowboys, Wyatt (Earp) and Billy (the Kid), from West to East and from capital to commune, in line with countercultural thinking. In contrast, Milius superimposes an internal conflict within Californian youth culture onto the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, in order to critique such thinking.

As indicated, Milius' 1969 draft of *Apocalypse Now* differs in substance from the movie(s) directed by Francis Ford Coppola, of which there are currently four authorized versions in circulation: two 1979 versions (one featuring the destruction of Kurtz's compound during the end credits sequence, which the other—more widely distributed—version lacks), the 2001 *Redux* version that extended the movie by 37 minutes, and the 2019 *Final Cut* which reduces the running time of the *Redux* but includes alternate footage. Loosely based on Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902, in book form), both the original screenplay and the filmed versions of *Apocalypse Now* follow the protagonist, Captain Willard, on his episodic journey up river towards his target of assassination: Colonel Kurtz, who has gone insane and founded an armed cult amidst the chaos of the Vietnam War. In this connection, Coppola is keen to emphasize that "everything memorable of *Apocalypse Now* was invented by John Milius."[2] Coppola is referring here to all of the movie's key set-piece sequences, which constitute the various stops along Willard's journey.



Pre-production location map for Willard's episodic journey through Vietnam and into Cambodia. Image taken from "Full Disclosure: Collector's Edition Booklet" of *Apocalypse Now: Collectors Edition*, Universal Studios, 2011, Blu-Ray.

These set pieces also feature in the 1969 version of the screenplay:

- the Wagner soundtracked helicopter assault on a coastal village,
- the encounter with a tiger within the jungle,
- the Playboy Playmates' USO (United Services Organizations) performance to hundreds of sex-starved soldiers,
- the acid nightmare of the Do Lung Bridge segment,
- the reappearance of the Playmates, stranded without fuel at a Medevac station, as would feature in the longer *Redux* version of the film,
- and, as featured in both the *Redux* and *Final Cut* versions of the film, the visit to the French plantation that emerges from the mists as if lost in time.

Yet the key structural points of the filmed movies' shared narrative arc—its beginning, middle, and end—were largely re-written and improvised during filming, while the voice-over narration which weaves the various episodes together and provides significant insight into Willard's character was written by the journalist Michael Herr, author of the excellent *Dispatches* (1977), late into the film's two year editing process.[3] It is through this process that the filmed versions of *Apocalypse Now* came to shift thematically from Milius' original 1969 screenplay, rendering the latter a unique object of study that stands apart from Coppola's movies in the originality of its themes.[4]



Screenshots from the beginning, middle, and end of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*—sequences improvised and developed during its filming and postproduction. Images from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola 1979).

The Vietnam War, Milius reminds us, "was fought by teenagers, who hopped up their helicopters and put flame jobs on the gun pods." In his estimation,

"[i]t became this sort of East-meets-West thing, an ancient Asian culture being assaulted by this teenage California culture."[5]

The writer-director's first draft screenplay, "Apocalypse Now" (1969) is committed to this theme. A close, contextualized reading of this unpublished work highlights a clash between his generation of "radicals," whom Milius aligns with surfers, and the counterculture of the late sixties—long-haired hippies whom he characterizes as psychedelic soldiers. My analysis finds that the conflict and dichotomy Milius presents between these two tribes of Californian youth culture relates to his coming of age within an early sixties surf scene that exhibited a sense of rebellion far different from that of the hippies that would emerge in the second half of the decade. The former exulted in thrills yet respected the norms of post-war U.S. society, where the latter sought to actively destroy them.

Further, Milius' characterization of the hippies in his original vision for *Apocalypse Now* communicates a fear of the counterculture that would develop more broadly within California across 1969. It is a fear that was born from the darker elements of such a scene, which were brought into harsh light via the Manson murders and the disaster at Altamont but that had been steadily intensifying within the shadows of the Californian youth culture.

With respect to scholarship in this area of film-studies, I believe this analysis of "Apocalypse Now" (1969) demonstrates the value of studying screenplays as textual objects in their own right, and I close with a broader critical reflection on the study of screenplays as autonomous works of art in light of the particular examination undertaken here.

Surfing the South China Sea

The most famous sequence of *Apocalypse Now* is one in which Colonel Kilgore launches a helicopter bombardment upon a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) stronghold to the soundtrack of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, all in the service of clearing the area for surfing. This sequence features in the 1969 screenplay and largely unfolds in the same manner in the 1979, *Redux*, and *Final Cut* versions of the film. However, upon the troops' landing on the beach, Milius foregrounds surfing in his writing of the scene where Coppola does not. Quite literally—Coppola shoots this aspect as a sight gag, with the surfers of Kilgore's squadron, Mike and Johnny, rushing off into the background of the mise-en-scène upon their orders from the Colonel to strip and surf. The latter continues to dominate the foreground as he talks shop with Lance Johnson—a famous surfer among the boat crew that is escorting Willard up river.



Surfers Mike and Johnny are relegated to a sight gag while Kilgore talks shop with Lance. Image from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola 1979).

Milius instead focalizes the scene through the hapless Mike and Johnny, the scripted direction finding the camera following them as:

They walk through the shallows carrying brightly colored boards. They look very scared—Jets scream overhead firing cannons. [...] They edge into the water and paddle through the mild shorebreak.

FULL SHOT POINT SURFERS

They paddle up to the point in the calm channel—the beautiful waves breaking beyond them.

CLOSE SHOT MIKE JOHNNY

They paddle on their stomachs keeping lower—breathing hard and constantly looking around scared out of their minds.[6]



PAT FARLEY



BRANT PAGE

Two surfers who took different paths when drafted for the Vietnam War; images from http://www.betweenthelinesfilm.com/.



Logo of the China Beach Surf Club; image from @chinabeach1968 / Facebook.

Meanwhile Colonel Kharnage—the original name of the character who would be given the equally silly moniker of "Kilgore" by the time of filming—barks directions at them from the beach as Lance watches anxiously: "Maybe he'll get tubed. [...] Maybe he'll get inside the tube—where—where they can't see him."[7] After two explosions are heard in the water, Lance "looks up and out towards the point in horror" while Kharnage is infuriated: "They ain't dead—they just missed a good set—the chicken shits."[8] He commands them through his megaphone to "Try it again you little bastards," as the surfers "come up near their boards and climb on—smoke hangs over the water."[9]

The narrative arc of this episode begins with Kharnage's self-characterization as "a goofy foot" and ends with Lance stealing "his Yater," [10] imbuing the screenplay with surf terminology, such that the episode encapsulates Milius' conception of the Vietnam War as "an ancient Asian culture being assaulted by this teenage California culture." [11] The colonial appropriation of the beach demonstrates the forceful imposition of Californian culture upon the Vietnamese, while the story of the Vietnam War is rendered an exclusively American one in its telling.

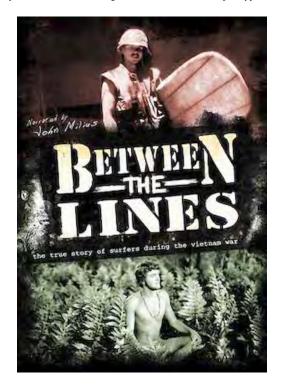
Multiple facets of the surf culture of the young U.S. soldiers that were stationed in Vietnam are explored in Ty Ponder and Scott Bass' documentary *Between the Lines: Surfers During the Vietnam War* (2008), which charts how the war impacted upon two surfers—Pat Farley, who proactively enlisted, and Brant Page, who attempted to dodge the draft. This content is described by Milius, who is the documentary's narrator, as "the soil from which APOCALYPSE NOW grew out of." [12] As such, Ponder and Bass' film provides us with an insight into the context in which the screenwriter developed the theme of surfing within his 1969 draft of *Apocalypse Now*.

A number of the Rest and Relaxation (R&R) Centers—temporary refuge points provided by the military—were sited at beaches with "rideable waves," and surfing gathered pace with the introduction of lifeguards who managed to convince Special Services to provide more surfboards "for lifesaving purposes." [13] At one R&R Center, the China Beach Surf Club was established, requiring potential surfers to prove themselves in the waves in order to ensure the limited boards available were put to good use. [14] This Club was founded in November 1967 by Navy storekeeper Larry Martin, and by the end of his deployment, in early 1969, he had issued membership cards to around 180 servicemen. [15]

In the 1969 draft of *Apocalypse Now*, it is on China Beach (properly named Bãi biển Mỹ Khê, or My Khe Beach) that Willard first appears and is picked up for his mission. Milius' writing about that beach is littered with signifiers of Californian beach life, and yet is imbued with an unsettling melancholy:

a long stretch of white beach—dotted with hundreds of pale men in black Marine issue swim trunks. They lie on their backs in groups—there are no women—nobody moves very fast—occasionally we SEE TWO MEN throw a football laconically. The day is grey and overcast but hot. The water reflects the sky and there seems to be no horizon. A SMALL GROUP sit on surfboards off the end of a rock jetty as there are no waves, just an endless sheet of grey glass. The men are quiet and seem held in suspended animation or move in SLOW MOTION—held in limbo.[16]

The milieu is subjectivized so as to give us the soldiers' state of mind, which



Poster for the 2008 film Between the Lines; image from http://www.betweenthelinesfilm.com/

relates to this beach being located, as specified by the scene heading, in "DANANG, I CORPS"—meaning a Tactical Zone for the allied Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). This is to say that these zones of refuge that became popular surf spots for U.S. soldiers—the R&R Centers at China Beach, Chu Lai, Cam Rahn Bay, and Buhn Thuan—were never far from combat. As Rick Thomas, a veteran of the River Assault Group, U.S. Navy, recalls:

"I'm out surfing at China Beach, you know, just having a great time, and, uh, the next thing I know, the war comes back. It's right up, a click down the beach. A Huey gunship is, you know, just firing—lighting up the beach. And it was, you know, the most incredible moment because here I am surfing, just feeling the joy, feeling, you know, the goodness of life again, and, you know, death and destruction lies a mile down the beach." [17]

Further, there were occasions when the teenage soldiers would make excursions further into enemy territory in pursuit of the best waves. Tom Luker, who was with the U.S. Marine Corps, recounts heading into "a Free Fire zone," in order to surf what he was told was "this idyllic place, he said it comes in at A-frame, it goes right and left." [18] Luker recalls handing over his M-16 for his turn on the board:

"I'm nervous as hell, I'm paddling out there, I'm thinking, all these thoughts are going through my head about, you know, is this dangerous, is this wrong—and a set just looms right up in front of me and without even thinking about it, just swung the board around, laid it down, two or three strokes into this bottom turn, beautiful wave... What war? What problems?"[19]

As Luker would state elsewhere in the documentary: "It's the real *Apocalypse Now* shot [laughs] and we did it, we did it.[20]

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Beach Boys, the band perhaps most synonymous with surfing in mainstream pop culture, similarly shifted towards car culture between 1963 and 1964 to tap into this Californian youth craze, reflecting the authenticity of Milius' dialogue.

Beyond Kharnage's assault on the beach, however, thematic resonances of surfing are carried throughout "Apocalypse Now" (1969) via the character who inspires the excursion —Lance Johnson, who is introduced by Milius as "a perfect image of the blond California surfer which he is." [21] [open endnotes in new window] As Peter Cowie notes, in Coppola's version of the film "Lance remains one of the film's few tantalizingly superficial characters," whose personality doesn't extend much further than this introduction, whereas in Milius' earlier drafts Lance's background is fleshed out in "[a]n intriguing scene." [22] In the 1969 draft, this scene occurs just before the arrival of Willard's crew—which also consists of Chief, Mr Clean, and Chef—at Kurtz's compound.

Countering Chief's reading of Lance as "the great Malibu stud," Lance explains he signed up for the war when he could have otherwise avoided the draft like his friends because: "My head was clouded by passion [...] I fell hopelessly in love— She left me and I wanted to kill myself—"[23] Ignored by his high school crush in the mid-sixties—"nobody cared about surfing then—it was all cars."—he finally caught her attention when "[t]hey had my picture on the cover of Reef magazine doing a cut-back on about a 4 foot wave at Rincon."[24] Lance undertook an affair with his married sweetheart, but she soon got divorced and ditched him:

"She had split from her husband and was living with an actor in T.V. commercials and his agent—What a bummer—Nam was my only choice. [...] Yeah—at least they tried to draft me." [25]

Lance's back story weaves together images of an idealized California, from its car culture to its surf magazines to its dream factory of Hollywood, and an intense teenage crush of the kind that would feature in many a pop record churned out from Los Angeles' studios and labels. In this way, Lance is key to the thematic substance of Milius' screenplay, informing a motif that runs throughout its narrative: "The tragedy of this war is a dead surfer." [26] Lance repeats this aphorism during and after key moments of danger:

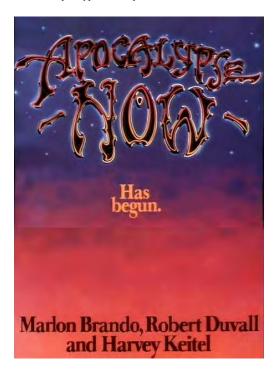
- when he is expected to join Kharnage's surfers in the treacherous waters;
- following a tracer attack along the river, where bullets "*rip chunks from the surfboard*" he had stolen from the Colonel;[27]
- and following their escape from the "cesspool of hell" that is the Do Lung Bridge.[28]

In the closing scene of the script, the aphorism is instead slurred by a mentally deranged Willard upon finding Lance's corpse the morning after the story's climactic firefight: "He was the tragedy—the tragedy of this war—"[29]

The surfer soldier motif highlights the sense of lost youth and ideals that the Vietnam War would bring down on the United States in the late sixties, exemplifying one key aspect of Milius' treatment of the Vietnam War as a war infused with Californian youth culture. The other aspect, which is placed in opposition to this sentimental conceptualization of California embodied by the figure of the surfer, is that of the psychedelic soldier.

The psychedelic soldier

The term "psychedelic" was invented by psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond to describe the effect of hallucinogens on the brain, and Camille Paglia submits that



1976 production announcement poster for *Apocalypse Now*, with the logo in a psychedelic font and listing Harvey Keitel, who was originally cast as Willard, among its cast.



The iconic image of Willard emerging from the water to assassinate Kurtz appears to be inspired by the first figure to appear in "Apocalypse Now" (1969) – the psychedelic soldier; image from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola 1979).

its transmogrification into "psychedelia" "remains the best word for the garish mental adventurism and extremism of the sixties" counterculture.[30] It is also a term that has been applied to the extended U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, particularly as the mid-sixties troop build-up saw the enforced drafting of America's young and the communication of the conflict via colour television as it brought the war into their homes: "Culturally, the Vietnam War was a video war and, aesthetically, a psychedelic war." [31] Coppola emphasizes this in his "\$30 million surrealist movie" through a number of visual and audio techniques—

- the pervasive use of coloured flares that fog up the frame,
- the piercing of fantastically bright lights through twisted milieus,
- and sounds that stretch from Wagner through megaphone speakers to an
 eerie synth score and a version of The Door's "The End" (1967) remixed
 specifically for use at the beginning and end of the movie, establishing
 symmetry between the protagonist and antagonist's madness. [32]

Variations of such aspects feature in Milius' 1969 draft of *Apocalypse Now*, but here psychedelia carries as a thematic charge a critique of the counterculture.

The first figure to appear in the opening scene of the 1969 draft is that of the psychedelic soldier, rising from out of the dirty water, much in the way Coppola would shoot Willard as he undertakes his assassination of Kurtz at the ending of his film. However, here

"a helmet emerges—the water pours off REVEALING a set of beady eyes just above the water. Printed on the helmet, clearly visible in the dim light, are the words 'Gook Killer' written in a psychedelic hand. The head emerges REVEALING that the tough looking SOLDIER beneath has exceptionally long hair and beard." [33]

We soon meet the rest of this crew:

"a smiling AMERICAN painted like an Indian," another "wearing a jungle hat with a Peace sign on it," and, in a shot that reveals their carnage—a trail of "smoking twisted bodies, fallen trees and charred leaves"—we come to "SEE the totally bizarre manner in which they are dressed. Some of them wear helmets, others wear strange exotic hats made out of birds and bushes. All of them have long savage-looking hair—bandoliers—flak jackets—shorts and little else. They wear montagnard sandals or no shoes at all and their bodies and faces are painted in bizarre camouflage patterns." [34]

Milius' depiction of this "weird patrol" is a confusion of signifiers that conflates hippie aesthetics with colonial brutality, the latter of which—as explored further below—wouldn't necessarily be negatively characterized by the writer if they were fighting for the right side.[35] Here, the discarding of military uniform/ity—both the clothing and standards of personal appearance—has fractured the image of a key icon of U.S. patriotism: the U.S. soldier.[36] The icon has become corrupted via a jumbled aesthetics: traits associated with enemies of the past (indigenous Americans) and native to their area of military intervention (the Montagnard sandals) along with adopting countercultural aesthetics (psychedelic design in the slogans and camouflage; hippie signifiers such as hair, bare feet and peace symbols). These are all incongruent with the image of the U.S. soldier and thus rendered by Milius as antithetical to being "American."

The perceived corruption (as opposed to the positive development) of American values posed by the counterculture is more forcefully communicated via the psychedelic soldier elsewhere in the screenplay. For instance, on the PBR (Patrol Boat River) on which Willard makes his journey, the smoking of marijuana



This poster by Bonnie MacLean for a concert at the Fillmore music venue in San Francisco is a classic of psychedelic design; image via D.King Gallery, Berkeley, Calif.

functions as an instance of male bonding among good old boys:

"Why don't you roll us a big joint?—I think the Captain'd like that." Chief tells Lance, early on in their mission. "They all look at Willard uneasily," but he swiftly diffuses the tension. "Take one a mine —" "He fishes into his breast pocket —pulls out a huge cigar-sized joint. They all smile—Willard lights up." [37]

Though drug use here takes on a ritualistic connotation in its own right, as entry into a brotherhood of sorts, the psychedelic soldiers later take this to its extreme—indulging in a cocktail of substances as part of a violent debauchery that invokes a religious fervor. This is evident in the sequence in which they await what appears to be their regular entertainment: an airstrike onto the surrounding jungle. "I dig this whole thing on speed—I'm a napalm freak," a "long-haired killer with a helmet" tells Willard, while a

large water-pipe is passed around with the finest hash. [...] One of the men chants the word napalm softly. Willard is too amazed to look [...] suddenly an orange ball of fire on the jungle floor below. The men tense up—another jet—tremendous flash and bright pink explosion. The men stir and talk to themselves—out of their minds—the show continues—Kurtz watches impassively. Bombs, rockets and napalm rips into the jungle below creating myriad bright balls of color and a hell of a lot of noise.[38]

Paglia writes that "massive drug taking in the sixties, promoted by arts leaders and pop stars, redefined the culture and set the stage for the decade's religious vision," and this is evident in drug use by Kurtz and his soldiers.[39] At "the remains of the ancient Temple" that serves as his compound, Kurtz presents Willard with:

"Marijuana—Hash-Hish—Opium—Cocaine—Un-cut Heroin—The gold of the Orient—enough there to buy four divisions. [...] The spoils of ward –"[40]

It is debatable whether the last word is a typo given that Kurtz's spoils of war may very well seem to him to be the reward of a divine protection bestowed upon a chosen people. He tells a repulsed Willard that his "eyes have not yet grown accustomed to the light of the eastern sun," and berates his guest and the America he represents—"you and your snivelization"—for thinking they "can judge our laws and our customs for ignorance is a steep hill with perilous rocks at the bottom." [41]

Kurtz and his cult represent the section of Californian youth in the late sixties who had embraced both Eastern religion and "an 'occult revival' the likes of which hadn't been seen in the West since the fin-de-siècle days of Madam Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society, and Aleister Crowley and the Golden Dawn,"[42]_while rejecting the society that had formed on the basis of the economic boom of U.S. post-war years. This is perhaps best encapsulated by Kurtz's early convert,

Captain Colby, whose docket features a letter

written in a scrawled savage hand to no one in particular. It reads:

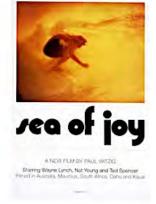
Sell the house Sell the car Sell the kids Find someone else Forget it I'm never coming back Forget it –[43]

A rejection of both commodity and the nuclear family, in Milius' characterization this tribe—hippie radicals, essentially—"were once Americans," but are now something else; blitzed on drugs and living among the "savage." [44]

In this way, the psychedelic soldier of Milius' "Apocalypse Now" (1969) functions as the thematic antagonist to that of the surfer, who represents an idealized vision of California. In reality, however, the young surfers of the late sixties didn't draw such a contrast between their subculture and that of the hippies. For instance, Douglas Booth highlights how, following Hollywood's boredom with surf-related narratives, a self-issuing visual culture took the form of independently made "pure" surf movies, which began as instructive material for use within the surf community but would then take a subversive turn. These films, by directors such as Paul Witzig and John Severson, "increasingly reflected counterculture themes" through the inclusion of images associated with the hippie movement: communal living, psychedelic drug use, eastern religious influence and such. [45]



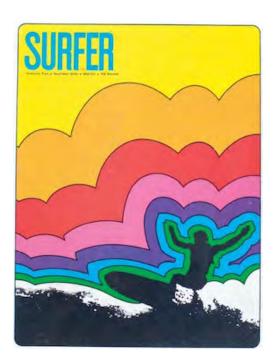




Posters for Paul Witzig's trilogy of soul-surfing films, released in 1967, 1969, and 1971 respectively; images from https://witzigfilms.com/the-paul-witzig-trilogy-vol1/.

Further, between 1968 and 1971, *Surfer*, the premiere magazine of the era for the surfing community, was steered "toward its counterculture zenith like a smoke-filled van pulling into the parking lot of a Led Zeppelin show" by its young editor Drew Kampion; "a sharp-edged, Dylan-loving hippie kid prone to spontaneous acts of poetry [who] was pretty onboard with revolutions, shortboard or otherwise." [46]

Scott Laderman finds such "claim[s] to the countercultural vanguard" to be "bereft of serious political meaning." [47] His discourse analysis of *Surfer* travelogues finds these surfer-reporters mostly ignoring or disparaging revolutionary fervour in countries experiencing political upheavals, apartheid, and dictatorship in favour of simply riding their new found waves. This leads him to conclude: "It is not difficult to be a 'rebel' when one defines rebellion as simply



John Severson's psychedelic cover of the March 1969 issue of *Surfer* magazine; image from www.surfer.com.

choosing to surf."[48]

Nevertheless, the sentiment of a surfing counterculture prevailed, as Milius himself would admit forty years on from his first draft of *Apocalypse Now*:

"Surfers basically went hippie; Man of the land type hippies. You know, guys on Maui chanting their mantra, living off the land, eating blotter acid, surfing Honolua Bay and in their down time contemplating the ultimate Brewer gun." [49]



Rainbow surfboards created and sold by John Gale and Mike Hynson, star of the seminal surf documentary *Endless Summer* (Bruce Brown 1963), who by the end of the sixties had become members of the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, a hippie commune turned drug smuggling ring; photo by Jeff Divine, circa 1969.

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Poster for John Milius' film *Big Wednesday* (1978).

Re/defining what's radical

The clash between surfers and the counterculture present in the 1969 draft of *Apocalypse Now* is not simply Milius' invention. The opposition that Milius establishes between the surfer and the hippie relates to an intergenerational conflict between those who came of age in the early sixties, and those nearer the end of the decade. For example, in criticizing late sixties surf movies, Bernard "Midget" Farrelly—who in 1962 had become the burgeoning sport's first world champion— "accused film (and magazine) producers of betraying the sport" and, with their depictions of drug use, of "conveying 'a bum set of values' [that were] misleading many people, some of whom even 'died on the needle.'"[50] [open endnotes in new window]

In this connection, it is notable that Milius conceives of the surfer community as

"its own culture. It's peculiar. It's a tribal culture. It's not a part of normal society. We are different. We are branded. We can have jobs and everything else in society but we are different. It's a religion." [51]

This conception pitches surfing as both a subcultural tribe and an alternative lifestyle, but one which does not outright reject mainstream society—as was the case with the more committed of the hippies with their "tune in, drop out" ethos.

Such a conception of the surfer is communicated most fully in Milius' epic, biographical, surf movie *Big Wednesday* (John Milius 1978). The film follows a trio of surfers across four big swells between 1962 and 1974, each of which marks a key point in their journey towards becoming their own men: "That's the test of a surfer, to ride alone. Shouldn't have to depend on anybody but yourself." [52] What is of relevance to my analysis of the "Apocalypse Now" script is the manner in which three eras of rebellion are communicated in the first three chapters of *Big Wednesday*.

In the summer of 1962 depicted in the film, we are introduced to the young surfer protagonists-Jack, Matt, and Leroy-and their beach town friends. As the irritable manager of their local café hangout chides, they're "delinquents," who should "grow up sometime, turn into a respectable person [...] The sport is a disease."[53] Reflecting on those times later, Leroy would refer to their friend Waxer as "the most radical guy I ever knew," because he drank a lot and "he had no brains." [54] This attitude is, of course, markedly different from the kind of "radicalism" that would come to define late sixties Californian youth culture—that of a progressive, and sometimes militant, leftism. And it is notable that this expression of early sixties radicalism is embodied by a house party at which Jack's mother sits in her bedroom reading Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961): "The music's still too loud. Keep the pressure off my coffee table." [55] Even when a group of townies gatecrash the party and violence ensues, she is only mildly annoyed and mostly bemused by the roaring of the kids and the sounds of the furniture smashing below. In this respect, we find this film's trio exulting in a sanctioned rebellion, wrapped up in expectations of teenage masculinity, by which the family unit is never under threat.



Wasted but ready: Leroy commandeers a surfboard for the drunken Matt; image from *Big Wednesday* (John Milius 1978).

As *Big Wednesday* advances, in the fall of 1965, we find that the beach culture has changed. Jack is now a lifeguard, a cop of the coastscape and rejected by the still "radical"—i.e. drunkard—Matt. Anticipating this change, Milius' local sage of the surf, a renowned boardmaker named The Bear, had cried at the close of the preceding chapter of the film: "They've already taken over the point. You'll be living under the booted foot of the lifeguard state." [56] The Bear is now a wealthy man, selling his boards out of an inland storefront, with his branding featured over a variety of merchandise. Milius here is communicating a real-world shift that occurred in the early sixties, which saw backyard operations transform themselves into localized surfboard workshops that functioned as "new commercial factories" serving a burgeoning "mass market for surfboard producers." [57] Matt, uneasy with this turn towards commercialization, finds himself conflicted over his sponsorship deals with The Bear:

"I'll bring back my board, I'll pay for 'em from now on. I don't want to be a star; pictures in the magazine, kids looking up to me... I'm a drunk, Bear. A screw up." [58]

Sponsorship and the professionalization of the sport indicate a mainstreaming of surfing, so that its supposed claims to radicalism, especially as earlier defined by Milius, are further diminished.[59] As such, in this chapter of *Big Wednesday*, we find that it is the young skateboarders that embody a newer form of rebellion: "Cool it, you little creep," The Bear tells one such brat, swerving inside his surf



The Bear confronts a skateboarding teenager in

his surfboard store; image from *Big Wednesday* (John Milius 1978).

store, "Go on outside and run down the shoppers." [60]

Milius does provide us with a sequence in which all but one of his surfer heroes attempt to evade the draft—feigning mental illness, injury, and homosexuality. However the next chapter of their lives, which takes place in winter 1968, draws a sharp distinction between these surfers and what had come to take shape as the counterculture. We find Matt, who successfully dodged the draft, meeting his wife Peggy at the aforementioned local café that was once their hangout. It has since been rebranded "Cosmic Café," replete with psychedelic Hendrix poster and similar designs painted along its exterior, sitar music inside, perhaps intended to produce "cosmic consciousness," [61] and what appears to be a drug burnout nodding out against the wall. Though Peggy finds the milieu amusing, Matt is uncomfortable among the café's hippie clientele, pouring out ginseng tea on his table after his long-haired waiter rejects his order of a couple of cheeseburgers: "Uh, no, we're off that trip, man. We don't serve animal hostilities." The waiter then accepts Matt's angry order of two cokes but tells him "that's bad karma, brother." "Hey, I'm not your brother," Matt tells him pointedly, "and turn down that crappy music." [62] Such a sequence makes explicit the dichotomy that Milius draws between the counterculture of late sixties California and his conception of radical surfers—his "tribe" of early sixties pioneers, who took to the waves with drunken abandonment and cared for neither commerce or enlightenment.



Matt having a hard time at the Cosmic Café; image from *Big Wednesday* (John Milius 1978).

Countering the counterculture

Milius' rootedness in an earlier form of surfer rebellion is also exemplified by his public persona. The opening segment of a 2013 documentary entitled *Milius* features a range of colleagues, friends, and family members who describe him as having a rebellious disposition. The argument the film puts forward is that since the sixties counterculture had been the norm within his Californian milieu as he came of age, Milius instead positioned himself as a right wing contrarian. [63] Yet even if it is the case, as Nat Segaloff has suggested, that Milius "privately chafes at his public image as a gun-toting, liberal baiting provocateur," it is also the case that "he allows himself to be painted as such, at times even holding the brush." [64] I would suggest that Milius' sense of "radicalism"—or his performance of it—is informed by that of Miki Dora, a key figure in the early-to-mid sixties Californian "[s]urfing subculture [that] played a crucial role in the development of Milius' artistic personality." [65]

As Laderman points out, "[s]urfers fancy themselves a rebellious bunch, and there are few 'rebels' more celebrated than Miki Dora"—despite his being "a notorious bigot with a soft spot for fascism." [66] Dora was "the best known of the so-called surf Nazis who adopted the emblems (the swastika and the Iron Cross) of the



John Milius, painting his public image.



White supremacists head to the beach, California, 1961; image from Allan Grant/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images.



Surf Nazis or slayers of swells? Image from *Big Wednesday* (John Milius 1978).

genocidal Third Reich" and "railed against" Jews, Mexicans, and African Americans. [67] Its notable, in this connection, that Milius' trio of heroic surfers set out on the waves in the opening sequence of *Big Wednesday* using a borrowed surf board with a spray-painted symbol that could be, interchangeably, a Templar Cross of the Crusades or an Iron Cross of the Third Reich. It is also notable that such symbols of fascism would have been prevalent during the era he is recounting in the film, [68] and that he also pitches his heroes as knights slaying the dragon of the giant swell, as indicated by the triumphant fanfare on the soundtrack.

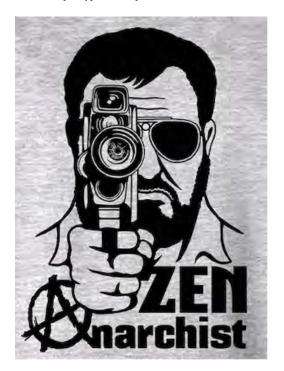
Milius' approach to writing is imbued with the conflation of signifiers, often contradictory, such that he is able to simultaneously mock and praise ideological positions. For instance, Milius has described Kharnage/Kilgore as "a wildly drawn character—straight out of *Dr. Strangelove*—who, I must admit. I didn't think would ultimately work." [69] On the other hand, one of the character's, and Milius', most famous lines, "Charlie Don't Surf," [70] was inspired by an incident that he clearly admires:

"That line, he said was inspired by a published quote by Israel's Ariel Sharon during the 1967 Six-Day War. A victorious Gen. Sharon went skin-diving after capturing enemy territory, Milius said, and declared, 'We're eating their fish.' 'That just really appealed to me,' he laughed. 'He was saying, 'We blew the s*** out of them, and now we're eating their fish.' Charlie don't surf." [71]

What appears to trump either side of an ideological argument for Milius is his admiration of retrograde hypermasculinity. This is evident in the penultimate sequence before the battle that closes "Apocalypse Now" (1969), where we intercut between lengthy, supposedly noble, battle speeches given by both Kurtz and the "People's Leader" commanding the NVA, which finally gives the Vietnamese a voice—albeit an equally cartoonish one.[72]

This bravado and tendency to conflate signifiers is also evident in Milius' own confusing characterization of his ideological position: his declaration that he is a "Zen Anarchist." [73]

Taken at face value, a "Zen Anarchist" should represent a peaceful person who believes in communal, non-hierarchical, governance... i.e. a hippie. But given Milius' evident distaste for hippies, I believe he intends us to take this attribution to mean he is copacetic about destruction. This kind of provocative posture frames the 1969 screenplay of *Apocalypse Now* via its "Author's Note," in which



T-shirt design based on John Milius' apparent self-description as a "zen anarchist"; original creator of the design is unknown to the author.

he describes two war protestors' attempt to dissuade a company of young paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division from "embark[ing] on their great adventure." [74] The hippies are clearly the subjects of mockery in Milius' anecdote—their misguided ideals are thrown in their faces, or smashed upon their heads, in a slapstick fashion: "the Texan took off his steel helmet and bashed the long-haired youth over the head causing a dull metallic clang." [75] The "entire company" takes responsibility for this assault when reprimanded by a sergeant, and Milius closes this story as so:

"This stunning show of esprit de corps did not impress the injured hippie who said, 'Animals, just a bunch of animals.' His friend looked at them in awe and replied, 'Just think what they'll be like when they come back." [76]

While the "awe" expressed by the second hippie communicates an overwhelming dismay that people like this—those who exult in "injustice and brutality"—exist, the author expresses that he is in awe of the "stunning show of esprit de corps." [77] And this awe on the part of the author subdues the possibility here of a critical stance towards the soldiers. They may be "animals" who will be psychotic upon their return, but Milius indicates that he is relaxed with such an idea.

Milius' apparent self-characterization as a "Zen Anarchist" brings us back to the provocateur posture people attributed to Dora, when they didn't want to admit the reality of his bigotry. [78] And, as in the 1968 chapter of *Big Wednesday*, when its pioneering protagonists are heckled at a screening of an independent surf movie, by the late sixties this form of rebellion had similarly become outdated. Milius would express this sentiment in an interview years later, pointing out that while many surfers had aligned themselves with the counterculture:

"the other significant part of surfing during that time was people like [Pat] Farley. The surf media just didn't publicize it. Surfers going to war for their country? What? They were viewed as slightly un-hip." [79]

In this respect, the positioning of the hippie counterculture as the enemy in "Apocalypse Now" (1969) reflects Milius' rage against the usurpers of his surfer tribe; a theme he would communicate more explicitly with *Big Wednesday*. However, his characterization of hippies as the psychedelic soldiers of Kurtz's cult is fascinating for a further reason—it resonates with the perceived state of the Californian counterculture at the end of the sixties.



A photograph of a young Milius on the beach accompanies the director's credit of his film *Big Wednesday* (1978).

JUMP CUT

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Poster advertising the Altamont Speedway Free Festival.

Nirvana Now

The darker undercurrent of sixties California would come to wash over the state in terrifying ways. Somewhat bizarrely, the December 5th 1969 dated first draft screenplay of *Apocalypse Now* both coincides and resonates with the two key events that would bury the hippie counterculture in the mainstream imaginary: the arrest of Charles Manson on December 2nd for the August murders of Sharon Tate and her friends, and The Rolling Stones' concert at Altamont on December 6th

The Altamont Speedway Free Festival was a free concert held in northern California by British rock band The Rolling Stones. It was pitched by the band's frontman as an attempt at "creating a sort of microcosmic society, which sets an example for the rest of America as to how one can behave in large gatherings." The press were quick to label it a "Woodstock West," anticipating a utopian day of peace and love.[80] [open endnotes in new window] Poorly organized due to a last minute location change, however, John McMillian writes of how far from utopia it was:

"Altamont proved to be a dirty, bleak space for a rock festival, almost completely lacking in amenities for the 300,000 concertgoers. People practically clambered over each other to get near the hastily built, three-foot high stage, and by almost every account, 'bad vibes' were regnant among the concertgoers." [81]

Further, continuing what Martin Rubin describes as an "unholy alliance' between pacifist middle-class bohemians and neo-fascist lumpen bikers" that had seen the Hell's Angels "bec[o]me fixtures in the Haight-Ashbury, hanging out regularly at Benches Pizza Parlor, scoring drugs and women, [and] sometimes acting as a kind of unofficial police force at various hippie functions," the Stones had hired the motorcycle gang as stage security at the concert.[82]



Hippies and Hell's Angels hang out in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, 1968; photograph by Jim Marshall.

Fuelled by the drink and drugs they were paid in, the Angels instead went on a rampage. Beating hippies with weighted pool cues and heavy boots, as the day rolled on even the support acts got their share of the violence, with a performer being "knocked out by a Hells Angel when [he] attempted to stop an Angel from beating up a black audience member right in front of the stage." [83] The violence would peak with the Angels' murdering a teenager mere feet from the stage as the Stones performed.



Violence at The Rolling Stones' Altamont concert; image from Michael Ochs Archives/Michael Ochs archives/Redferns.

Paglia has cited rock music as a key element in the counterculture's religious turn:

"the titanic, all-enveloping sound of rock was produced by powerful, new amplification technology that subordinated the mind and



A 1968 tour poster sold at concerts by The Doors.

activated the body [...] Through the sensory assault of that thunderous music, a whole generation tapped into natural energies, tangible proof of humanity's link to the cosmos."[84]

However, Paglia concludes, while "[t]he basic principle of the counterculture began as communality," it "ended as the horde, the most primitive entity in social history," and this was reflected in both the "restless, bickering mob" of Altamont and its sounds.[85] The Stones' occult-influenced songs emphasized the "darker blooms of the summer of love,"[86] and Altamont demonstrated that "rock and roll was getting back to its roots in impulse and violent assertion."[87]

Paglia's characterization of rock and roll very much aligns with how it is received by Milius' psychedelic soldiers. If the climax of the sixties counterculture is said to have been the drug-fuelled orgiastic violence of the Hell's Angels, set to a soundtrack of the Stones, [88] Milius' original vision of *Apocalypse Now* anticipates this with its climax of a drug-fuelled orgiastic slaughter, set to a soundtrack of The Doors.

"All manner of drugs are distributed—water pipes with hash-hish—Americans eating grass—injecting speed—sniffing cocaine" as the NVA approach to destroy Kurtz's compound; their "lust for blood aroused[,] 200 Montagnard and 15 Americans prepare to do battle with an entire army." [89]

And the rock and roll soundtrack is key to the horrific violence that will ensue. Colby informs Kurtz that they "have dual tapes underground—If one is hit the other will continue to play," [90] and as the proximity between the two sets of enemies collapses the sky suddenly becomes

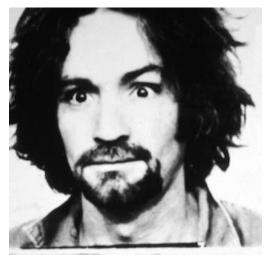
"bright with flares which produce a weird psychedelic light and blared out at tremendous volume over and above the dim of battle are the Doors singing 'Light My Fire.' [...] The Americans and Montagnards stand up screaming—obviously this is their battle song—they charge up—M-16's in both hands—blasting—kicking—bayonetting—gouging eyes—slitting throats—biting necks, both sides collide." [91]

The use of The Doors, a key band of the Californian counterculture, in this ultraviolent sequence intensifies its resonance with the reality of the movement's decline into chaos in 1969.

This draft of the screenplay was submitted just a day before the horrific events at Altamont. Only a few days earlier, on Dec 2nd, Charles Manson and several members of his cult had been arrested for their two-day murder spree of the previous August—another instance of the "optimistic sixties saga degenerat[ing] into horrifying incidents of group psychology."[92]

Manson was an ex-convict who would ingratiate himself within the hippie scene of Haight-Ashbury following his release from prison in 1967, before attempting to do the same in Hollywood in pursuit of a recording career. Across August 8-10, 1969, Manson would order his cult of mostly young women—known as The Family—to commit two slaughters in a ritualistic fashion as apparent revenge for his failure to gain a record contract and/or an attempt to instigate an apocalyptic race war.

The filmed versions of *Apocalypse Now* acknowledge these murders when Clean,



LA5)LOS ANGELES, Dec.2-CULT EADER?--Charles Manson, above, 34, was described today by the los Angeles Times and attorney dichard Caballero as the leader of quasireligious cult of hippies, three of whom have been arrested on murder warrants assued in the slayings of actless Sharon Tate and four others at her home. Manson is in jail

Dec 2 1969 newspaper clipping on the arrest of Charles Manson; via Getty Images.



A 1968 interview with Dennis Wilson where he describes his interactions with Manson's cult.

one of the members of Willard's PBR crew, reads from a news clipping received as part of a package from home: "'. . . Charles Miller Manson ordered the slaughter of all in the home anyway, as a symbol of protest.' That's really weird, ain't it?"[93] John Hellman perceives the filmed version of Kurtz as "a version of the 1970s guru [...] an ominous cultleader" of the kind that Manson would model and anticipate as that decade unfolded.[94] Yet, even though Manson had only vaguely—if shockingly—entered public consciousness in the announcement of his arrest three days before the submission of the 1969 draft of *Apocalypse Now*, it is notable that Milius' Kurtz follows the very same model of this cult leader.[95]

Just as Manson had convinced his followers that he was Jesus Christ, [96] this "tall powerful man wearing a tattered green beret, flak jacket and loincloth" reigns over his ancient temple as a God. [97] Though he insists that he is working for God and is under his will and direction.

"[w]ild looking savages man these guns and bow and praise Kurtz as he passes," before a "woman rushes up to Kurtz and on her knees grasps his hand and kisses it. He reaches down imperiously and strokes her hair. She smiles as if healed and blessed and runs back to her bunker."[98]

As with Manson's Family of mostly young women, Kurtz has what he calls

"my concubine pit—where women never see the light of the day. They eat, sleep and bear children in the same room. They only leave when they go to be buried—Yet they are content." [99]

And just as Manson would farm out his women to music industry figures, such as Dennis Wilson of The Beach Boys, and supply them with drugs in order to gain his elusive record contract, [100] Kurtz uses the same method to convert Willard's men, amongst others, to his cause. "They have a vice for the Indian hemp. [...] They are pacified," a Lieutenant informs him of a set of prisoners, while Chief, who has also joined Kurtz's cult, explains more plainly to the former leader of his former mission: "they gave us a lot of good grass and some women." [101]

Reflecting the acid fascism of Manson, Kurtz espouses extreme justice—"The pleasure of crime is momentary - its punishment eternal." And the most striking

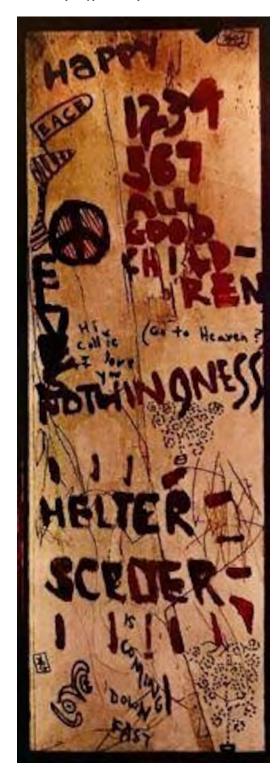


Image of the "Helter Skelter" pantry door found on Spahn Ranch.

alignment between the Kurtz of the 1969 script and Charles Manson is their respective visions of war and revolution.[102] Manson famously conceived a convoluted white supremacist revolution he called "Helter Skelter," after the Beatles song. This involved impoverished black people striking out against rich white people, committing vicious murders in neighborhoods like Beverly Hills (in reality, Manson would instruct his Family to undertake such killings), which would create "mass paranoia among the whites" who would then indiscriminately slaughter black people in response.[103] The African American radicals—the Black Panthers and Black Muslims—would have been in hiding, subsequently reemerging to cause a fracture within white America by guilt-tripping the "hippieliberals" and setting them on a warpath with "uptight conservatives," resulting in a "War between the States, brother against brother, white killing white." [104] Following this second massacre, the African American radicals would return and kill the remaining whites. After all this, the Manson Family would re-emerge from their "refuge in the bottomless pit in Death Valley" and enslave the African Americans, having "now grown to 144,000, as predicted in the Bible—a pure, white master race," leaving Manson to "rule that world." [104]

Milius' Kurtz similarly plans for his people to re-emerge from their redoubt of the ancient temple following the destruction of the rest of the world:

"these gates are two thousand years old—the stone is only hardened by the sun—the metal of your machines will rust and return to the earth before these rocks grow a shade darker." [106]

However, he notes that his enemies are already "too busy destroying themselves—and when they are through—we shall emerge—[...] patience—it is our greatest weapon." [107] Further, for all his delusional bluster, his timescale is far more realistic, stretching across several generations:

"Some day we shall retake what is ours but it will not be in our lifetime nor yet in that of our children's children so God has given us patience. [108]

The resonances are striking but I would suggest that the above linkages between Manson and the 1969 version of Kurtz are as coincidental as that of the screenplay's alignments with Altamont. While Coppola had headed out to "San Francisco, epicentre of the counterculture," to set up American Zoetrope,[109] Milius had remained in Los Angeles, where Manson had been making inroads within the Hollywood in-crowd.[110] However, I would suggest that it is unlikely that Milius, as a recent University of Southern California graduate and fledgling screenwriter, would have crossed-paths with Manson as he cavorted with the celebrities of a Hollywood that was coming to a close. Further, though at least one biker film of a series made by American International Pictures to which Milius had contributed had been shot at Spahn Ranch in the presence of the Manson Family, if the writer had met its leader there, such an incident would surely have emerged in an interview by now, especially given his inclination towards a good anecdote.[111]

Nevertheless, the above resonances are telling as they communicate Milius' general unease at the way in which the hippie counterculture had been unfolding, and would eventually unravel in these two horrific incidents—an unease shared in many accounts of that era.



Illustration related to the Fountain of the World cult; via Nomidia.net.

For example, Brant Page, the aforementioned surfer who spent 1968 fleeing the draft board, recalls stopping by at Haight-Ashbury

"to look for some LSD. What seemed like a groovy, wonderful, movement of a new culture of new experimentations of life turned out to be just another war [...] because people started bringing in all these horrible drugs, cops were everywhere trying to bust people, they hated the hippie movement. I had to just get out of town." [112]

Of the political strands of this movement, McMillian writes that by the summer of the following year, Students for a Democratic Society

"the most powerful student organization in American history destroyed itself in a paroxysm of factional infighting between Weatherman, an obnoxious clique of ultramilitants who drew their name from a Bob Dylan lyric, and the Progressive Labor Party, an equally unpleasant, doctrinaire neo-Marxist organisation." [113]

Further, while Hellmann argues that Manson's arrest and subsequent notoriety "marked the coming into public consciousness of the gurus and cult compounds that in the 1970s replaced egalitarian communes," the reason Milius could conceive of Kurtz in so similar a way was because such cults were nevertheless already present, replete with charismatic, messianic, leaders, in late sixties California.[114] For instance, Jim Jones, who would murder his thousand followers at his Jonestown compound in Guyana in 1979, had built up his church with a mostly African American congregation "drawn from San Francisco at the height of the hippie era."[115] Manson had himself passed through a number of such Californian cults, most notably The Process: The Church of the Final Judgement, the Solar Lodge, and the Fountain of the World, which, respectively, helped him to develop his ideas of a duality between Jesus and Satan ("Christ to judge, Satan to execute judgement"), the coming of an apocalyptic race war and recruitment through sex and drugs, and the use of messianic motifs and rituals. [116] The point is that each of these elements were in circulation across California in myriad forms amongst the "seekers," or the mystically inclined, of the sixties counterculture.

However, in the summer of 1969, these darker elements would seep into mainstream consciousness following the headline grabbing ritualistic killings of Sharon Tate and the La Biancas. No perpetrators would be identified for several months and rumours abounded as to who could have committed the crime. As Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry put it, a "cloud of fright hung over southern California more dense than its smog." [117] The main suspects in the mind of the public appeared to have been drug-fuelled, sex-crazed, deviants—with Tate's father even

"[g]rowing a beard and letting his hair grow long, [...] frequenting the Sunset Strip, hippie pads, and places where drugs were sold, looking for some leads to the killer(s)." [118]



Milius explains how he came up with the title "Apocalypse Now" (again); image from "An *Interview* with John *Milius*" (Francis Ford Coppola 2010).

Such suspicions wouldn't be too far from the truth, insofar as the Manson Family was a hippie cult, but it had tarnished an entire movement of seekers of cosmic consciousness.[119] "As the summer of 1969 lengthened," Robert Stone recalls,

"there was a whole lot of shaving going on in Los Angeles. Goodhumored tolerance of the neo-bohemian scene was suspended, and whatever it was was not funny. Fear inhibited." [120]

It is within this context that the 1969 draft of Apocalypse Now was written, and Milius' characterization of Kurtz and his weird makeshift tribe resonates with this fear and paranoia around the more radical elements of the counterculture—whether mystical or political, or a convergence of both. In fact, Milius' dialogue clearly makes the analogy between Kurtz's Helter Skelter-esque revolution and the supposed threat of the hippie radicals to the stability of the United States—the youth's rising in anger at their country's drawn out military intervention in Vietnam and their outright rejection of U.S. society:

"Do you see that man at the well - When one bucket empties the other fills - So it is with the world - At present you are all full of power but you are spilling it slowly and wastefully and we are lapping up the drops as they spill from your bucket -"[121]

In this connection, and in another conflation of seemingly contradictory signifiers, we can consider the story's title. Milius explains that the title of his script

"came from the buttons hippies wore that said NIRVANA NOW with a peace symbol. I made one with a tail and engine nasals, so that the symbol became a B-52, and read APOCALYPSE NOW. As a matter of fact, I put it on one of my boards." [122]

Despite their seemingly divergent connotations of peace and violence, the two slogans are technically imploring the same thing: an end to the world as we know it, and the grasping of a knowledge previously withheld.

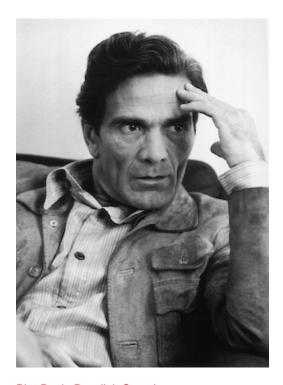
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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Pier Paolo Pasolini; Getty Images.

Conclusion / critical reflections on the study of the screenplay

Coppola's filmed versions of *Apocalypse Now* use the attraction-repulsion of Willard and Kurtz to communicate the central theme of an American schizophrenia produced by the U.S. intervention in Vietnam—desperate to dominate and win this decades-long war, whilst simultaneously seeking to maintain the nation's self-image as a just and powerful force of good. [123] [open endnotes in new page] I have demonstrated how Milius' original screenplay is instead focused on an internal conflict within the Californian youth culture of the late nineteen-sixties, an imagined clash between two oppositional tribes that he has superimposed upon the Vietnam War. This conflict, really an intergenerational tussle between the writer and the left-leaning upstarts that had subverted his beloved surf culture, provides us with a unique insight into the complexities of U.S. subculture during a period that has been otherwise addressed innumerable times. It also bestows Milius' first draft screenplay with an originality of theme, content, and subtext that distinguishes it from both Conrad's source novella and Coppola's films.

In elucidating these themes through a close, and contextualised, analysis of "Apocalypse Now" (1969), I contribute to a strand of scholarship that seeks to establish screenplays as objects worthy of study in their own right. [124] And, in doing so, I must also necessarily address the ontological debate surrounding the screenplay within both literary and film scholarship. This is because, as Barbara Korte and Ralf Schneider write, "[i]f a screenplay is read for its own value, it has reached the greatest possible degree of independence from the film," and such autonomy is important given that the screenplay has often been considered "a generic and intermedial hybrid that occasionally aspired to literary status but could not really claim the artistic 'autonomy' of 'real' literature such as a novel or poem." [125] This position, which considers the screenplay to be an intermedial form, has been attributed to Noel Carroll, Jochen Brunow, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, with the latter commonly cited as having provided a key formulation of this critique, as per Jerónimo Arellano:

"At the heart of these dismissals lies the questions of the ontological status of the screenplay text as an incomplete or intermediary form—a 'structure that wants to be another structure,' in Pier Paolo Pasolini's much-cited words—and the nature of authorship in an art form that is destined to be transformed into another." [126]

However, I would suggest that this is a mischaracterization of Pasolini's analysis of the ontological status of the screenplay, which—on the contrary—posits a strong counter to such negative characterizations of the art form. His above, oftcited words appear in a text in which Pasolini formulates an original conception of the screenplay—or "screenplay-text"—that positions the art form as distinct from both literature and cinema. The screenplay-text constitutes "the sign of another linguistic system" in its production of images within the mind of the reader, whilst also incorporating the structures of both literature and cinema on the level of its text:

"the word of the screenplay is thus, contemporaneously, the sign of

two different structures, inasmuch as the meaning that it denotes is double: and it belongs to two languages characterized by different structures." [127]

To put it another way, it is its technique of "alluding to meaning"—which is communicated through mental images—"through two different paths, simultaneous and converging"—that of the "normal path of all written language" and another that "forward[s] the addressee to another sign, that of the potential film"—that renders the screenplay "an autonomous 'technique,' a work complete and finished in itself."[128]

Explaining this distinctive nature of the screenplay within a semiotic context, Pasolini writes of how, while the "sign is at the same time oral (phoneme), written (grapheme), and visual (kineme)" and "we always have simultaneously present these different aspects of the linguistic 'sign,' which is therefore one and three," the coordination of these aspects differ with respect to the reading of literary texts and the screenplay-text. [129] Symbolist poetry, for instance, "requires us to cooperate by 'pretending' to hear those graphemes acoustically," such that "it sends us back to the phonemes, which are simultaneously present in our mind even if we are not reading aloud," meaning we follow two simultaneous paths that come to be integrated in the act of reading: "the normal sign-meaning and the abnormal signsign-as-phoneme-meaning." [130]

The screenplay-text, however, finds the reader integrating "the incomplete meaning of the writing of the screenplay, following two paths, the normal signmeaning, and the abnormal sign-as-kineme-meaning." [131] The latter path relates to the production of mental images within the reader, which occurs through the reading of a screenplay's written words (the first path). "The image is born of the coordination of the kinemes," and it is this production of the mental image—or "im-sign"—that renders the screenplay-text an autonomous work of art: "the 'kineme', which separated from the other two aspects of the word, has become an autonomous, self-sufficient sign." [132]

The screenplay-text is an autonomous work of art, and its autonomy is found in its functioning as a dynamic movement between the two structures of the literary and cinematographic, in the self-contained fashion of "a process which does not proceed."[133] This is to say that while a substantive element of the form of the screenplay is its "allusion to a 'potential' visualizable cinematographic work," this potential cinematographic work need not be realised for the screenplay to be considered a complete and finished work.[134] All that is required is its ability to project cinematic images within the reader's mind on the basis of its written text:

"The technique of scriptwriting is predicated above all on this collaboration of the reader: and it is understood that its perfection consists in fulfilling this function perfectly. Its form, its style, are perfect and complete when they have included and integrated these necessities into themselves." [135]

It is in this respect that "the sign of the screenplay-text is presented as the sign that expresses meanings of a 'structure in movement,' that is, of 'a structure endowed with the will to become another structure.'"[136] This is not a lack that renders the screenplay an intermediary form, but is instead its distinctive function.[137] The notion that the screenplay is marked by a "coarseness and incompleteness" only speaks to the inadequacy of literary and film criticism to deal with "the sign of another linguistic system"—a dynamic structure that transcends the concrete materials (words or filmic frames) assessed by "stylistic criticism." [138] As Pasolini writes:

"one can't 'perceive' this 'desire for form' from a detail of the form.



Images from the envisioned *Apocalypse Now* videogame; images from Erebus LLC.

This desire must be ideologically presupposed; it must be part of the critical code."

Beyond this analysis of Pasolini's take on the ontology of the screenplay, which would render any screenplay a viable object of study, the particular work examined in this article is useful for the manner in which it opens up responses to broader critiques of the screenplay as an art work. In particular, "Apocalypse Now" (1969) invites us to reconsider the assumed dichotomy between screenplays and filmic works that characterizes the former as one of many such texts within the production process and the latter as the definitive text that appears at the end of the process; a process by which "the film scenario is entirely 'burnt up',"[140] having served its purpose as merely a "blueprint," or another ingredient, for the finished film that deserves our sole critical attention—a position attributed to Carroll.[141]

Throughout this article I have referred to "Apocalypse Now" (1969) when referring to the first draft screenplay, but have also made reference to Coppola's Apocalypse Now and Milius' Apocalypse Now. The undated italicized title-Apocalypse Now-is intended to refer to the concept of the artwork, or "the art-idea." Such a concept partially aligns with what Ian W. MacDonald calls "the screen idea," though not with much precision, and drawing a comparison between these two notions is useful for drawing out their nuances. While both function as "a central imaginary which can be viewed from different perspectives, like a crystal with different facets," MacDonald's screen idea relates to a "singular project that people are working on"—specifically one intended to produce a "screenwork"—rather than the broader, conceptual, art-idea I am referring to, with which a wider range of persons within an open-ended timeline may participate to produce a variety of media. [142] This is to say an art-idea can be manifested in myriad forms—whether screenplay, film, novelization (text or graphic), game (video, board, card etc.), or theme park ride, for that matter—and across several decades. The art-idea of Star Wars: A New Hope, for instance, has taken all such forms, while a videogame and associated novels were recently conceived for Apocalypse Now. [143] Further, as MacDonald writes, the screen idea

"is a term which names what is being striven for, even while that goal cannot be seen or shared exactly. The goal of the concrete never arrives—as the screenwork develops, each draft script becomes one more fixed version of the screen idea. The final film—the screenwork—is another such version." [144]

While both the art-idea and the screen idea relate to a productive virtuality that can never be exhausted in its manifestations, the passage indicates that MacDonald nevertheless positions the cinematographic "screenwork"—or "final film"—as the end of a given project, given it is its development that underpins the entire process ("as the screenwork develops..."). This is where we depart. The reason I have come to refer to the art-idea of *Apocalypse Now* throughout this article is because of the large number of variant versions of the film that exist, as listed at the beginning of this article. This raised the question as to which filmed version should be privileged when referring to Coppola's take on *Apocalypse Now*, and why any one of those takes ought to be privileged over Milius' take on the art-idea of *Apocalypse Now*.

The question of privilege with respect to the manifestation of this art-idea relates to another: is the notion of a definitive "final film" outdated? While the four officially released versions of *Apocalypse Now* are perhaps an extreme example, it is closely followed by the three versions of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, and it is the critical and commercial success of the "director's cut" of the latter, released a

decade after the 1982 version, that opened up a space by which the notion of the filmic work as authoritative and concrete has come to be destabilized. Variations of the filmic work within this space most commonly take the form of the following:

- "director's" cuts, typically restoring / presenting, for the first time, all of the content the film's director wished to feature when creating the film, within their intended design (sequencing, soundtrack, etc.);
- "extended" cuts, typically home media versions that feature more content in order to attract repeat viewers;
- "unrated" cuts, home media versions featuring explicit content that was cut from the theatrical versions in order to avoid negative commercial impact from restrictive age certifications;
- "remasters" by which black and white films come to be colorized, color films are color corrected—sometimes in a manner markedly different to the original, as with the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999) whose green hue was further intensified for its 2008 Blu-Ray release—or images are manipulated / corrected with the use of Computer Generated Imagery, as with George Lucas' updating of the original *Star Wars* trilogy;



Comparison of colour grading between different editions of *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis 1999); images via John Allegretti, @MrAllegretti / Twitter.

• alternate versions of films by which the original colour images are rendered in black and white, as with *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller 2015) and

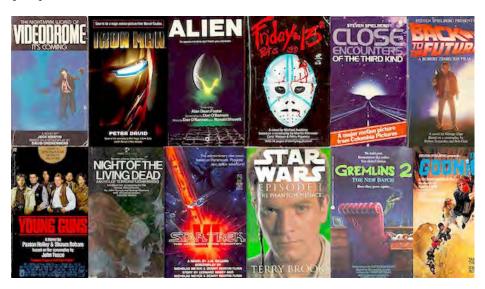


Blu-Ray collection presenting the two versions of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller 2015) as two distinct films.

- *Logan* (James Mangold 2017), and given limited theatrical runs and home media releases;
- and the re-soundtracking of films, which includes the dubbing of films with release-region appropriate voice-actors, silent-era films given contemporary musical backing (e.g. Giorgio Moroder's 1984 restoration of Fritz Lang's 1927 silent feature *Metropolis*) and contemporary films being screened with new music inspired by the original movie (e.g. a re-scored version of Nicolas Winding-Refn's *Drive* [2011] made exclusively for airing on the television channel BBC Three in 2014).[145]

Clearly, cinematographic takes on an art-idea can be as processual as a screenplay with respect to its various manifestations, with no time limit to such re-drafting, given that some works are revised decades after their original release, producing yet another manifestation.[146] And the opportunity to produce a screenplay is similarly open-ended, given the existence of screenplays that have been produced and published after a film's completion. I am referring here to the retroactive screenplay, such as those produced by Coppola and Milius for Apocalypse Now: Redux (2001) or Colin McCabe's reconstruction of Donald Cammell's lost screenplay for Performance (1970), both published in 2001. Given these are written after the completion of the specific version of the audio-visual product they intend to communicate, there is no definitive reason why such screenplays couldn't be revised further, to enhance the action/direction prose for instance, and be re-published once again. Ted Nannicelli's view on such retroactive screenplays, in agreement with Carroll, is that they are merely transcriptions which "like a video recording of a performance, is just a record of an artwork on which it depends for its existence and is not an artwork in its own right." [147]

However, I believe that such screenplays align with Pasolini's conception of the screenplay-text so long as they function to project mental images within the readers' minds via this particular form of writing, and that, beyond mere transcription, there is room for creative license in the retroactive screenplay akin to that of the literary genre of movie novelizations, a form of text that attained popularity in the nineteen-seventies and which similarly served as a "record or memento of these milestones of cinema at a time when audio-visual records were not yet easily available" due to the lack, or the expense, of home media appliances. [148]



Examples of film novelizations from across four decades; images via knowyourmeme.com.

Given the equivalence in status between both the screenplay and the filmic work within a continual process related to a shared and multiplicitous art-idea, we can

consider each such manifestation to be a valid object of study regardless of where they appear within that lineage of works.

With respect to this article, I opened with a few comparisons between the filmed versions of *Apocalypse Now* and its first draft screenplay in order to orient the reader towards the distinctiveness of the latter and my hope is that readers recognize that Milius' screenplay is a fascinating work of art regardless of the various cinematographic manifestations of *Apocalypse Now* steered by Coppola. The analysis of "Apocalypse Now" (1969) given in this essay demonstrates how a screenplay can produce its own original themes and subtexts, which are worthy of study in their own right and provide valuable insight into the subject matter addressed, regardless of the audio-visual works—or any other kind—that are produced in relation to them.

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Notes

- 1. Lewis, Jon. *Whom God Wishes to Destroy... Francis Coppola and the New Hollywood*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995: 13. [return topage 1]
- 2. Figueroa, Joey and Zak Knutson, *Milius*. Chop Shop Entertainment and Haven Entertainment, 2013.
- 3. Along with the live, on-set improvisation, that occurred—as captured in the documentary film *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper and Eleanor Coppola 1991)—Francis Ford Coppola's approach to improvisation also encompassed workshopping new ideas with actors, which "provided the basis of many of the scenes I would write out late at night." Coppola, Francis Ford. "Introduction," in John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola. *Apocalypse Now Redux*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001: viii. This approach was pioneered by independent filmmaker John Cassavetes, who encouraged improvisation during his films' rehearsals "so that the actors had considerable input and helped to shape not only the actual script but the final film." Murphy, J.J. *Rewriting Indie Cinema: Improvisation, Psychodrama, and the Screenplay*. New York: Columbia University Press: 48.
- 4. Additionally, Peter Cowie points out that, upon his decision to direct the film in 1975, Coppola asked Milius to revise the screenplay and bring it closer to its source material of Conrad's novella. Revisions to the screenplay resulted in a further nine drafts that year, with the last dated 29 June 1976, three months after shooting had already commenced. Cowie, Peter. *The Apocalypse Now Book*. London and New York: Faber and Faber, 2000: 7 and 43. That the filmed setpiece sequences described earlier largely align with Milius' 1969 draft further speaks to the way that the changes, first through attempted redrafts and then onset improvisation and extensive post-production work, specifically relate to a rethinking of the overarching narrative structure and themes of the story.
- 5. Milius, John. "A Soldier's Tale," in *Rolling Stone: The Seventies*, eds. Ashley Khan, Holly George-Warren and Shawn Dahl. Great Britain: Simon & Schuster, 1998: 273.
- 6. Milius, John. "Apocalypse Now." First draft 12/5/1969. San Francisco: American Zoetrope, 1969: 41. Quotations given in italics relate to scene descriptions and direction from the screenplay, while quotations that do not feature italics communicate dialogue from the screenplay. No italics feature in the original screenplay but such formatting has been employed here to help the reader to differentiate between quoted descriptions/direction and quoted dialogue.
- 7. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 42.
- 8. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 42 and 43.

- 9. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 43.
- 10. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 26 and 48.
- 11. Milius, "A Soldier's Tale": 273.
- 12. Pure Frustration Productions, "Between the Lines," 2008. Accessed 06/20/20 http://www.betweenthelinesfilm.com/
- 13. Ponder, Ty and Scott Bass. *Between the Lines: Surfers During the Vietnam War.* Pure Frustration Productions. 2008.
- 14. Ponder and Bass, *Between the Lines*, and Jake Newby. "Pensacola documentary 'Back to China Beach' chronicles Vietnam War surfing club," *Pensacola News Journal*, Dec 11 2019. Accessed 06/26/20 https://eu.pnj.com/story/news/local/2019/10/11/pensacola-documentary-back-china-beach-chronicles-vietnam-war-surfing-club/3928878002/
- 15. Newby, "Pensacola."
- 16. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 6.
- 17. Ponder and Bass, Between the Lines.
- 18. Ponder and Bass, Between the Lines.
- 19. Ponder and Bass, Between the Lines.
- 20. Ponder and Bass, *Between the Lines*. At a screening of *Between the Lines* at the Alma Surf Festival, in Sao Paulo, Brasil, co-director Ty Ponder recounted another such story—an American soldier who caught "a glimpse of the Viet Cong with his AK-47s while he waited for the waves on a deserted beach, but who went through the experience unscathed." Ricardo Calil, "Surf in the Apocalypse," *Trip* #170, February 2 2009. Accessed 06/27/20.

https://revistatrip.uol.com.br/trip/surf-no-apocalipse

- 21. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 16. [return to page 2]
- 22. Cowie, The Apocalypse: 42-43.
- 23. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 99.
- 24. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 100.
- 25. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 101.
- 26. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 43.
- 27. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 62-4.
- 28. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 93.
- 29. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 130.
- 30. Paglia, Camille. "Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*. Third Series, Vol. 10, No. 3, Winter, 2003: 86.
- 31. Norris, Margot. "Modernism and Vietnam: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Fall, 1998: 730.
- 32. Norris, "Modernism": 730.

- 33. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 1.
- 34. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 3-4.
- 35. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 4.
- 36. In their 2018 survey of a nationally representative sample of Americans, Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston found that "roughly half" of the 2,451 respondents still believe "service members join the military primarily out of intrinsic motivations: because they are sincere patriots who love their country or because they are good citizens who see it as their duty to serve," despite the expectation of military sociologists and historians that "the mythic tradition of the citizen-soldier" would be destroyed within "the mind of the U.S. public" once the U.S. "abandoned the draft and replaced conscripts with paid professionals," rendering military service "just a 'job'." Krebs Ronald R. and Robert Ralston. "Patriotism or Paychecks: Who Believes What About Why Soldiers Serve," Armed Forces & Society. April 2020: 2. For his part, Milius claims that among his friendship group "I was the only one who wanted to enlist" to fight in Vietnam, though his asthma meant he "washed out," and his admiration for the figure of the U.S. soldier is evident throughout his Rolling Stone article. Milius, "A Soldier's Tale": 272.
- 37. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 49.
- 38. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 116
- 39. Paglia, "Cults": 90.
- 40. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 110.
- 41. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 110 and 113.
- 42. Lachman, Gary Valentine. *Turn Off Your Mind: The Mystic Sixties and the Dark Side of the Age of Aquarius.* Basingstoke and Oxford: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2001: 6.
- 43. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 90.
- 44. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 107.
- 45. Booth, Douglas. "Surfing Films and Videos: Adolescent Fun, Alternative Lifestyle, Adventure Industry," *Journal of Sport History*, Fall, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1996: 320.
- 46. Prodanovich, Todd. "60 Years of Getting Weird," *Surfer*. Spring 2020. Reprinted online. Accessed 07/31/20 https://www.surfer.com/features/surfer-magazine-60-year-anniversary-reenvisioning-classic-surfer-covers/
- 47. Laderman, Scott. "A World Apart: Pleasure, Rebellion, and the Politics of Surf Tourism," in *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*, eds. Dexter Zavalza Hough-Snee and Alexander Sotelo Eastman. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017: 49.
- 48. Laderman, "A World Apart": 59.
- 49. Surfer Intern. "John Milius: A Brief QnA with the Narrator of "Between The Lines," *Surfer*. July 22 2010. Accessed 06/27/20 https://www.surfer.com/features/milius-gna-btl/
- 50. Booth, "Surfing Films": 320. [return to page 3]
- 51. Surfer Intern, "John Milius."

- 52. Milius, John. Big Wednesday. A-Team Productions, 1978.
- 53. Milius, Big Wednesday.
- 54. Milius, Big Wednesday.
- 55. Milius, Big Wednesday.
- 56. Milius, Big Wednesday.
- 57. Warren, Andrew and Chris Gibson. "Soulful and Precarious: The Working Experiences of Surfboard Makers," in *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*, eds. Dexter Zavalza Hough-Snee and Alexander Sotelo Eastman. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017: 342-3.
- 58. Milius, Big Wednesday.
- 59. Hough-Snee, Dexter Zavalza and Alexander Sotelo Eastman. "Consolidation, Creativity, and (de)Colonization in the State of Modern Surfing," in *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*, eds. Dexter Zavalza Hough-Snee and Alexander Sotelo Eastman. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017: 84-108.
- 60. Milius, Big Wednesday.
- 61. Paglia, "Cults": 81.
- 62. Milius, Big Wednesday.
- 63. Figueroa and Knutson, Milius.
- 64. Segaloff, Nat. "John Milius: The Good Fights," in *Backstory 4: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1970s and 1980s*, ed. Patrick McGilligan. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2006: 276.
- 65. Leotta, Alfio. "I love the smell of napalm in the morning": violence and nostalgia in the cinema of John Milius," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 57, Fall 2016. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-LeottaMillius/index.html
- 66. Laderman, "A World Apart": 48-9.
- 67. Laderman, "A World Apart": 49.
- 68. Couldwell, Andrew. "Surf Nazis," *Club of the Waves*, June 2 2019. Accessed 12/21/20 https://clubofthewaves.com/feature/surf-nazis/; Duane, Daniel. "The Long, Strange Tale of California's Surf Nazis," *The New York Times*. Sept 28 2019. Accessed 04/12/20

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/28/opinion/sunday/surf-racism.html

- 69. Milius, "A Soldier's Tale": 273
- 70. "Charlie doesn't surf" in the original script. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 30.
- 71. Patterson, Thom. "'Apocalypse' writer: Most scripts today 'are garbage'," *CNN*. 9th March 2009. Accessed 08/03/20 http://edition.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Movies/03/09/john.milius.movies/index.html
- 72. The Vietnamese dialogue fits with Coppola's characterization of the conclusion to the screenplay: "a comic-strip resolution. Attila the Hun [i.e., Kurtz] with two bands of machine-gun bullets around him, taking the hero [Willard] by the hand, saying, 'Yes, yes, here! I have the power in my loins!' Willard converts to Kurtz's

side; in the end, he's firing up at the helicopters that are coming to get him, crying out crazily. A movie comic." Marcus, Greil. "Journey Up the River: An Interview with Francis Coppola," *Rolling Stone*, November 1 1979. Reprinted online. Accessed 07/11/20 https://greilmarcus.net/2014/07/04/journey-up-the-river-an-interview-with-francis-coppola-1979/

- 73. Leotta, "'I love'."
- 74. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": n.p.
- 75. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": n.p.
- 76. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": n.p.
- 77. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": n.p.
- 78. As Martin Scorsese recalls in Figueroa and Knutson, *Milius*: "I heard that he referred to himself as a Zen Anarchist." The phrase appears throughout many print and online texts regarding Milius (e.g. Leotta, "'I love'"), though the original source is never credited. In any case, it's a widely known attribution that at the very least is part of the public persona that Segaloff and others suggest Milius actively encourages.
- 79. Surfer Intern, "John Milius."
- 80. Maysles, David, Albert Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin. *Gimme Shelter*. Maysles Films Inc., 1970. [return to page 4]
- 81. McMillian, John. *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011: 1
- 82. Rubin, Martin. "'Make Love Make War': Cultural Confusion and the Biker Film Cycle," *Film History*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Exploitation Film (Autumn) 1994: 355-6.
- 83. Poole, Buzz. "What happened to Rock and Roll After Altamont?" *Literary Hub*, December 6 2019. Accessed 07/24/20 https://lithub.com/what-happened-to-rock-and-roll-after-altamont/
- 84. Paglia, "Cults": 62.
- 85. Paglia, "Cults": 91.
- 86. See, for instance, The Rolling Stones' psychedelic long-player, *Their Satanic Majesties Request* (1967), and songs such as *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968). The band's sources of occultism were two filmmakers—Kenneth Anger, for whom Mick Jagger, the lead singer of the Stones, wrote a soundtrack (*Invocation of my Demon Brother* [1969]), and Donald Cammell, in whose directorial debut Jagger starred (*Performance*, co-directed by Nicolas Roeg, filmed in 1968 and released in 1970).
- 87. Lachman, Turn Off: xvii and 5.
- 88. It's worth pointing out that while the mainstream press, once it had actually caught up with what had really occurred that day, would come to repeat the "death of the sixties" motif in regard to Altamont, the underground press, written by and for participants of the counterculture—"many New Leftists never bothered to read daily newspapers, at least not when they wanted to know what was going on in their own milieu"—responded in much the same way. McMillian, *Smoking:*3-4. McMillian cites a lead article in the *Berkeley Tribe*, written in the immediate aftermath of the event, that he believes encapsulates "the trope [that]

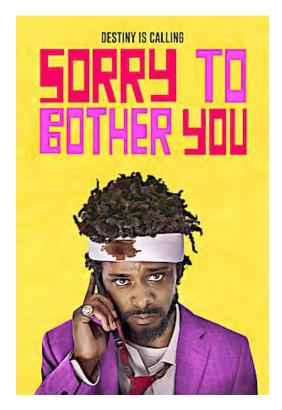
arose in the underground press" in response to what had happened: "Altamont . . . exploded the myth of innocence for a section of America. [...] Our one-day micro society was bound to the death-throes of capitalist greed. [...] Clearly, nobody is in control. Not the Angels, not the people. Not Richard Nixon, or his pigs. Nobody." McMillian, *Smoking*: 2.

- 89. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 118.
- 90. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 123.
- 91. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 126.
- 92. Paglia, "Cults": 63.
- 93. Francis Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*. Omni Zoetrope, 1979.
- 94. Hellmann, John. "Apocalypse Now Redux and the Curse of Vietnam," in *The United States and the Legacy of the Vietnam War*, ed. Jon Roper. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007: 67-8
- 95. MSNBC. "NBC News Report on the Manson Family's Arrest," 1969. Archive footage posted by *True Crime Magazine* on YouTube, August 14 2017. Accessed 07/25/20 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8IQB4OcUrc
- 96. Bugliosi, Vincent and Curt Gentry. *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders*. London: Arrow Books, 1974; 2015 edition: 45.
- 97. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 107.
- 98. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 108-9.
- 99. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 112.
- 100. Vincent, Alice. "A Beach Boy's deal with the devil: when Dennis Wilson met Charles Manson," *The Telegraph*. Nov 20 2017. Accessed 10/08/20 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/beach-boys-deal-devil-dennis-wilson-met-charles-manson/
- 101. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 115 and 119.
- 102. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 111.
- 103. Bugliosi and Gentry, Helter Skelter: 319.
- 104. Bugliosi and Gentry, Helter Skelter: 320.
- 105. Bugliosi and Gentry, Helter Skelter: 320.
- 106. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 108.
- 107. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 114.
- 108. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 114.
- 109. George-Warren, Holly. "Preface," in *Rolling Stone: The Seventies*, eds. Ashley Khan, Holly George-Warren and Shawn Dahl. Great Britain: Simon & Schuster, 1998: 3.
- 110. See, especially, Part II of Melnick, Jeffrey. *Creepy Crawling: Charles Manson and the Many Lives of America's Most Infamous Family*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2018.

- 111. Albright, Brian. *Wild Beyond Belief! Interviews with Exploitation Filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s.* Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, 2008: 65.
- 112. Ponder and Bass, Between the Lines.
- 113. McMillian, Smoking: 173.
- 114. Hellmann. "Apocalypse": 68.
- 115. Paglia, "Cults": 64.
- 116. Spann, Michael. "Acid Fascism," in *Death Cults: Murder, Mayhem and Mind Control*, ed. Jack Sargeant. London: Virgin Books, 2002: 87-96.
- 117. Bugliosi and Gentry, Helter Skelter: 57.
- 118. Bugliosi and Gentry, *Helter Skelter*: 89.
- 119. Paglia, "Cults": 65.
- 120. Stone, Robert. *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties.* New York : HarperCollins e-books, 2007: 202.
- 121. Milius, "Apocalypse Now": 114.
- 122. Milius, "A Soldier's Tale": 273.
- 123. As Michael Richardson writes, Coppola's filmed version of *Apocalypse Now* "succeeds in being *the* Vietnam War film, while in a real sense not being about Vietnam at all," which is to say that "*Apocalypse Now* is a film about the United States written, like a palimpsest, across the landscape of Vietnam." Richardson, Michael. *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema*. New York and London: Continuum, 2010: 138-9. [return to page 5]
- 124. See Arellano, Jerónimo. "The Screenplay in the Archive: Screenwriting, New Cinemas, and the Latin American Boom," *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, Año 69, No. 2 (December 2016): 114, for a brief overview on the relatively recent emergence of screenplay scholarship across the past two decades.
- 125. Korte, Barbara and Ralf Schneider. "The Published Screenplay—A New 'Literary' Genre?," *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*. Vol. 25, No 1. (2000): 96 and 89.
- 126. Arellano, "The Screenplay": 116.
- 127. This text is translated by Louise K. Barnett and Ben Lawton and was originally published in 1965. Citations here lack reference to pagination due to its being accessed via online research repository *ProQuest*. Pasolini, Pier Paolo. "THE SCREENPLAY AS A "STRUCTURE THAT WANTS TO BE ANOTHER STRUCTURE". *The American Journal of Semiotics*; Kent Vol. 4, Iss. 1/2, (1986): 53-72. ProQuest. Accessed 09/15/21 https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/screenplay-as-structure-that-wants-be-another/docview/213747053/se-2?accountid=14987
- 128. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 129. Pasolini. "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 130. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."

- 131. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 132. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 133. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 134. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 135. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 136. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 137. Pasolini does not explicitly state whether what applies to the screenplay-text applies to theatrical/play-texts but, given the rootedness of the latter in the literary tradition, one could reasonably assume that theatrical scripts privilege the grapheme and the phoneme in the written-spoken language system, rather than partaking in the coordination of the kineme such that it produces an im-sign that connects the screenplay to the cinematic. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 138. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 139. Pasolini, "THE SCREENPLAY."
- 140. Korte and Schneider, "The Published Screenplay": 90
- 141. See Ted Nannicelli, "Why Can't Screenplays Be Artworks?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (FALL 2011), pp. 405-414
- 142. MacDonald, Ian W. *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013): 4
- 143. Erebus LLC. "Apocalypse Now like Fallout: New Vegas on acid in Vietnam (Canceled)," *Kickstarter*. Accessed 10/10/21 https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/fringerider/apocalypse-now-the-game/?ref=kicktrag
- 144. MacDonald. Screenwriting Poetics: 6 and 4.
- 145. The examples given here encompass officially authorized variations on released movies, and exclude the unofficial re-edits or remixes created, for instance, by the Fan Edit community (https://ifdb.fanedit.org/), or leaked (unofficially released) workprints of films.
- 146. There are some filmmakers who state the theatrical version of their films are the "final," or only, cuts. However, the example of the three versions of *New York*, *New York* (1977) by Martin Scorsese, who has repeatedly expressed such a position, shows that the release of a variation is not always their own decision but that of the studio, producer, or rights holder.
- 147. Nannicelli, "Why Can't Screenplays": 409.
- 148. Korte and Schneider, "The Published Screenplay": 91.

JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Boots Riley's anti-capitalist comedy is as incisive as it is entertaining.

Art, activism, sales calls, and slave labor: dialectics in *Sorry to Bother You*

by Milo Sweedler

Boots Riley's debut film, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), is one of the great anticapitalist films of the early twenty-first century. Although Riley characterizes the movie as "an absurdist dark comedy with magical realism and science fiction," which it is, the film also provides one of the most clear-sighted accounts of grassroots class struggle to appear in mainstream North American narrative cinema in decades ("Beautiful Clutter"). As witty, playful, and delightfully quirky as it is, Riley's tale of an ethically compromised telemarketer, his artist-activist girlfriend, and the labor organizer that unionizes their workplace sheds brilliant light on the class struggle today.

I analyze here two different kinds of dialectics that Riley uses in telling his story of class conflict in an alternate present-day Oakland, California. One the one hand, a narrative technique used repeatedly in the film is dialectical in the Ancient Greek sense of staging a debate between interlocutors holding different points of view. On the other hand, numerous scenes in the film set up a contradiction that the movie momentarily resolves, often in unexpected ways, before introducing a new element that complicates the resolved contradiction. If, as Karl Marx argued more than 150 years ago, "What constitutes dialectical movement is the coexistence of two contradictory sides, their conflict and their fusion," *Sorry to Bother You* is dialectical in this way, too (*Poverty of Philosophy* 108). This article examines how these two dialectics shape Riley's class-conscious film.

The plot

The movie tells the story of Cassius "Cash" Green (LaKeith Stanfield), an unemployed twenty-something-year-old Black man living with his artist-activist girlfriend, Detroit (Tessa Thompson), in his uncle's converted garage. Cash manages to land a job as a telemarketer at a company called Regal View, but he has little success selling encyclopedias and self-help books over the phone until an avuncular colleague, Langston (Danny Glover), suggests that he try using his "white voice" when cold calling prospective clients. Cassius then excels as a white-voiced telemarketer, eventually rising to the rank of Power Caller, moving up a floor in the Regal View office building, dramatically increasing his income, and receiving a new clientele to whom he sells a very different kind of product.

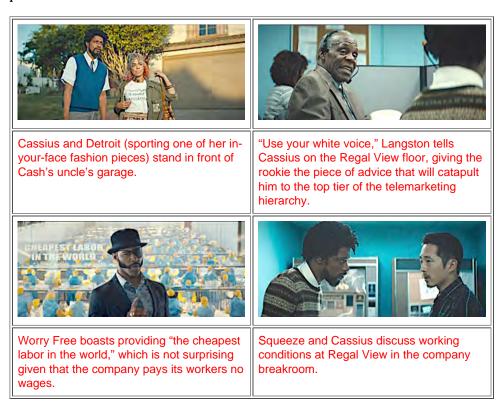
Regal View's biggest client is Worry Free, a labor-supply company that offers lifelong contracts to workers that it houses and feeds in lieu of paying wages. On his first day as a Power Caller, Cassius lands Worry Free a contract with a Japanese cell phone manufacturer worth "upwards of ten million dollars." An unrivaled powerhouse even among Power Callers, Cash has found his calling as a



Although closer in tone to a workplace comedy like Office Space (1999), Sorry to Bother You's ideological antecedents are job-action dramas such as Norma Rae (1979), Silkwood (1983), and Matewan (1987).

white-voiced telemarketer selling slave labor to multinational corporations.

Several countervailing factors complicate Cassius's meteoric rise to the upper echelons of this capitalist society. First, shortly after his arrival at Regal View, an itinerant labor organizer by the name of Squeeze (Steven Yeun) begins the process of unionizing the Regal View employees. Detroit, Langston, Cash's friend Sal (Jermaine Fowler), and virtually everyone on the ground floor of Regal View support the unionization effort. In principle, Cassius supports the union drive too, but once he becomes a Power Caller, his solidarity with the rank-and-file employees on the lower level wanes. When they go on strike, he crosses the picket line, undercutting the telemarketers' efforts and buttressing management's position.



Second, Detroit, who is a politically engaged artist and a foot soldier in the anti-

capitalist "Left Eye" movement, as it is called, perceives Cassius's actions as an act of betrayal. No longer able to reconcile her political convictions with her boyfriend's material support for a system she vehemently opposes, she breaks up with Cash and begins a casual affair with Squeeze, whose politics align much more closely with hers.

It is not until Cassius learns that Worry Free CEO Steve Lift (Armie Hammer) has been genetically modifying workers, turning them into half-horse, half-human beings called "equisapiens," that the ethically challenged protagonist finally receives the call of conscience, switches allegiances, and becomes a Worry Free whistleblower. However, Cassius's revelations, made on numerous media outlets, that Worry Free is turning people into humanoid workhorses only inflate the company's stock.





On Squeeze's cue, the Regal View telemarketers put down their phones in unison.

Picketing telemarketers face off against "Starkwater" (read "Blackwater") security guards in front of the Regal View office building.





Riley uses footage of the 2011 Occupy Oakland protests for television coverage of the fictional Worry Free demonstration (Riley, "Commentary with Director").

Cassius's discovery that Worry Free CEO Steve Lift is turning people into half-horse, half-human beings called "equisapiens" finally convinces the ethically challenged protagonist to join the working-class struggle.

Meanwhile, Cassius, who snorted a line of what he thought was cocaine that Lift gave him at a Worry Free company party, discovers at the end of the movie that the substance he snorted was in fact the "fusing catalyst" that turns people into horses. In the film's coda, Cash, now an equisapien, shows up unannounced with a small posse of horse-people at Lift's mansion. "I'm Cassius Green calling on behalf of stomp a mud hole in your ass.com," he says into the video intercom. "Sorry to bother you," he continues, ironically reprising the phrase he uttered countless times as a telemarketer. He then smashes the intercom and bursts through Lift's front door with a roar.

Modes of engagement

This film narrative undoubtedly has roots not only in the filmmaker's stint as a telemarketer but also in his decades-long engagement in both left-wing politics and the Bay Area arts scene. A social activist and labor organizer who joined the International Committee Against Racism at the age of 14 and the Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party at 15, Riley has been the lead singer and principal songwriter for the revolutionarily charged Oakland-based hip-pop / funk / punk band, The Coup, since the early 1990s. The title of the group's debut album, *Kill*



Boots Riley of the Coup performs on stage at Sala Apolo on May 14, 2014, in Barcelona, Spain (Photo by Jordi Vidal/Redferns via Getty Images).



Private security guards escort Cassius across the picket line in front of the Regal View office building.



Cassius visits Detroit at the gallery while she

My Landlord (1993), gives an indication of the band's politics.

Each of *Sorry*'s main protagonists—Detroit, Cash, Squeeze, and even Sal—reflects an aspect of this artist-activist who is also a former telemarketer. Riley is upfront about the inspiration he drew from his lived experience in drafting these characters. "All the main characters in the movie are based on me," he tells *Sight & Sound*'s Kaleem Aftab (Riley, "White Lines" 25).

"There's the artist [Detroit] who's trying to figure out whether art means something, there's the organiser [Squeeze] who's arguing with the artist, there's the guy [Sal] who's trying to be funny all the time and then there's the person [Cassius] hoping that their life means something" (Riley, "White Lines" 25).

My interest in these comments lies not in the light they shed on the film's autobiographical dimensions but in their suggestion that the characters represent different ways of seeing and interacting with the world. Michael T. Martin perceives the characters more or less in this way when he calls each protagonist in the film "an archetype of sorts" (179). Rather than archetypes, though, I would characterize the protagonists as representatives of different social and political perspectives. The film unfolds at times almost like a Socratic dialogue in which characters debate a problem, shedding light on diverse facets of the situation and often (although not always) leading the viewer to a particular conclusion.

Numerous exchanges between Detroit and Cash unfold in this way. Roughly midway through the film, for example, Cassius has risen to the rank of Power Caller, made a series of spectacular sales for Regal View, crossed the picket line, and moved into a swanky new apartment. At that point, Detroit, fed up with her lover's infidelity to the workers' cause, informs Cash that if he goes to work and crosses the picket line that day, she will leave him. Cassius responds to this ultimatum by trying to justify his decision to keep working:

"CASSIUS: Baby, what are you asking me to do? Are you asking me to quit the fattest job I ever had?

DETROIT: But Cassius, it's not fat! It is morally emaciated. You sell fucking slave labor, Cassius!

CASSIUS: What the fuck isn't slave labor?"

The two positions come into relief with particular clarity in this exchange. Detroit's assessment of Cash's "morally emaciated" job selling slave labor is bangon, but the rhetorical question Cash asks in response to this accusation also has an element of truth to it. As the late anarchist anthropologist David Graeber argues, "There is, and has always been, a curious affinity between wage labor and slavery" (352). Although Cash's defense here is undoubtedly self-serving, it is not necessarily made in bad faith. Whereas Detroit sees Worry Free's twenty-first-century version of the slave trade as morally reprehensible, Cash counters, not entirely without justification, that all labor under capitalism is essentially slave labor. As Graeber writes in a phrase that lends credence to Cash's admittedly solipsistic self-justification:

"Whether you've been sold or you've simply rented yourself out, the moment money changes hands, [...] all that's important is that you are capable of understanding orders and doing what you're told" (352).

works on her Africa collages.



A tight point-of-view shot from Cassius's perspective follows the lit joint in Detroit's hand while she explains the idea behind her Africa collages.





Detroit and Squeeze discuss art and activism on an Oakland streetcorner.



"That was like that scene in *Norma Rae*," Detroit says to Squeeze following the work stoppage at Regal View. The reference is to the scene (above) where the Sally Field character incites her coworkers to turn off their machines, bringing production to a halt.

This exchange between Cash and Detroit harks back to an earlier conversation between the two lovers during a late-night wind-down session in the art gallery where Detroit later shows her work. The scene takes place on the evening after Cassius received his promotion. When she asks him what he is going to be selling in his new role as Power Caller, he avoids the question by changing subjects. Admiring a massive painted collage in the shape of the African continent, he asks her why she chose that particular form. A tight point-of-view shot from Cassius's perspective then follows the lit joint in Detroit's hand as she improvises a response to Cash's question:

"I wanted to talk about a life shaped by exploitation, about fighting for a say in our own lives, about how beauty, love, and laughter thrive and flourish under almost any circumstances, how capitalism basically started by stealing labor from Africans."

While she makes this impromptu miniature artist's statement, a chime melody playing in the background moves to the sonic foreground as Detroit's voice becomes muffled and muted. Representing Cash's subjective aural perspective as well as his visual point of view, the shot communicates with crystalline clarity Cash's utter lack of interest in what Detroit is saying. What he wants is the joint in her hand, not an exposé on the relation between Africa and capitalism. When he finally gets a hit of the joint, he refocuses his attention on her, says, "Yes, OK, I'm listening now," and then jokingly summarizes what she was saying: "Capitalism in Africa is... booming!" Cassius makes this mock summary with light-hearted humor, but his attempt to lighten the mood also betrays his obliviousness and probably his indifference to what she was saying. As far as he—an African American who just landed a job as a Power Caller at a major telemarketing firm—is concerned, the relation between capitalism and Africa is just fine.

Detroit's speech here to a fidgety and distracted Cash about the origins of capitalism in the transatlantic slave trade is arguably the film's most powerful piece of dialogue. It channels simultaneously Marx, who claimed in 1846 that "slavery is the pivot of our industrialism today" (*On America* 36), Oliver Cromwell Cox, who argued that "racial antagonism [...] developed within the capitalist system as one of its fundamental traits" (xxx), and Cedric Robinson, who made the claim that the "development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions." (2) In this speech, Detroit provides the movie's most compelling analysis of capitalism as a system of exploitation that originated in the African slave trade. However, although she functions here, as elsewhere, as the film's veritable mouthpiece, the movie is not entirely uncritical of her mode of engagement.

A conversation between Detroit and another character—in this case, Squeeze—beckons the viewer to compare and contrast two different types of anti-capitalist activism. The conversation takes place on an Oakland streetcorner shortly after Regal View's first work stoppage. When Detroit learns that Squeeze, who organized the flash strike, is not a Regal View employee like the others but rather a professional labor activist, she asks him whether his job consists in organizing political actions like the one he orchestrated on the Regal View floor:

"DETROIT: Is that what you do? You just go from place to place stirring up trouble?

SQUEEZE: Trouble's already there. I just help folks fix it. DETROIT: Yeah, that's what I do with my art, too. You

know, expose the bullshit.

SQUEEZE: It's not exactly the same thing. DETROIT: It's pretty much the same."



Detroit's arresting costume for her art performance consists of see-through plastic boots and three cobalt-black hands covering her genitals.



Detroit dons a motorcycle helmet to protect herself from the onslaught of projectiles that audience members hurl at her during her performance.



Detroit uses her white voice to discuss her work with gallery attendees at her show.

The scene leaves in suspense whether his work as a labor organizer and her work as an artist are fundamentally the same thing. Squeeze responds to Detroit's remark by saying, "I haven't seen your stuff," and the conversation turns to another topic. However, later in the film, when we see an example of Detroit's work, an answer to the question emerges.

The scene of Detroit's art opening is profoundly ambiguous. The exhibit has several components. On the walls hang huge Africa collages like the one that Cassius admired in the earlier scene while life-sized human statues in what looks to be papier mâché are placed around the gallery floor. The first part of the scene leads us to believe that the show consists of these two types of works. Then a gong rings and Detroit, clad in transparent plastic boots, a black raincoat, and sunglasses, walks onto the floor to announce the evening's main event. Explaining that the buckets at the back of the room contain broken cell phones, bullet casings, and water balloons filled with blood, she invites her audience to throw these objects at her while she recites lines from the Motown-produced film, *The Last Dragon* (1985). She then removes her raincoat, exposing a costume consisting of two cobalt-black hands covering her breasts and a third one (complete with raised middle finger) emerging from her crotch, and the performance begins.

Detroit's interactive performance piece is reminiscent of Serbian performance artist Marina Arbramović's works that invite audience members to use instruments of torture on her. In addition to exploring the relationship between the performer and the audience and the limits of the body, though, Detroit's piece also has an explicitly political dimension. As the artist explains to her crowd of spectator-participants, the objects in the containers at the back of the room are meant to evoke the wars and hardships that cell phone manufacturers have caused in their pursuit of coltan, a mineral found in the African Congo. If, as Cassius suggested in the earlier scene, capitalism is "booming" in Africa, Detroit's piece clarifies that it is not necessarily Africans who are benefitting from the boom. By inciting her mostly white audience to pelt her with tokens of capitalist violence, she has gallery attendees metaphorically re-enact the multinationals' assault on the African continent.

Detroit's performance is a potent piece of engaged art. Yet, as powerful (and disturbing) as the work is, it is hardly the same thing as organizing a union and leading a work stoppage. The last shot we see of Detroit's performance, in which the artist dons a motorcycle helmet to protect herself from the onslaught of projectiles that audience members hurl at her, leaves us skeptical about the effectiveness of this form of political engagement.

In case we had doubts about where Riley stands on this issue, his decision to have Detroit speak in a white voice (dubbed by Lily James) at the gallery, both when she discusses her work with visitors at the beginning of the scene and when she delivers her performance at the end, should clear up the matter. This decision transmits a wordless yet resounding critique of the politically engaged artist. While Cash affects an exaggerated upper-class white man's accent (voiced by David Cross) to sell human labor power, Detroit adopts an English accent to present her work. It is as though, from Riley's perspective, they were engaging in the same sort of commerce.

Further reinforcing this implicit critique, when Cassius defensively responds to Detroit's accusation that he sells slave labor for a living by telling her, "You ain't gonna do shit neither by selling fucking art to rich people," his criticism rings true. The itinerary of a Worry Free billboard exemplifies this argument: Detroit or one of her fellow "Left Eye" militants defaces it with spray paint, and it then appears later in the film in its defaced form as an artwork hanging on a wall of



A Worry Free billboard urges prospective employees to "show the world you are a responsible babydaddy."



Anti-capitalist "Left Eye" activists deface the Worry Free billboard, changing it to read: "Show the world your response baby!"



The defaced Worry Free billboard reappears toward the end of the film in Steve Lift's mansion, where it is displayed as a work of art, complete with a rope barrier cordoning it off from viewers.

none other than Steve Lift's mansion. As confrontational and thought-provoking as Detroit's work is, it is unlikely to have much effect on the social conditions she critiques.

In interviews, Riley characterizes the opposition between Detroit's and Squeeze's different forms of engagement by contrasting direct political action with what he calls "spectacle." Whether defacing a Worry Free billboard or putting on an anticapitalist art performance, Detroit essentially engages in "spectacular" acts of resistance. Yet what is needed to effect real social change, Riley insists repeatedly in interviews, is job actions like the one that Squeeze organizes at Regal View. As the filmmaker says to Michael Martin:

"To me, the two main questions are how can we have power over the world around us? What power do we already have that we can harness?" (Martin 188)

The answer to these two questions, Riley asserts, is "the withholding of labor" (Martin 188).

In sum, although Detroit is the film's mouthpiece, Squeeze is its unalloyed hero. He is the only character that the movie unequivocally endorses without qualification. Whereas Detroit plays Socrates to Cash's Gorgias (the sophist whose position Socrates refutes in Plato's *Gorgias*) in her exchanges with her power calling lover, she is Squeeze's foil in her streetcorner conversation with the labor organizer.

The irony here is, of course, that Riley presents this critique of spectacular forms of resistance in the decidedly spectacular medium of film. His criticism is self-referential, the product of an artist—a veteran musician as well as a novice filmmaker—questioning the value of his work. As he divulges in his interview with Aftab, the debates in *Sorry* are, in effect, externalizations of inner dialogues that Riley has with himself. "I kind of wrote all the dialogue playing chess with myself," he tells Aftab (Riley, "White Lines" 25).

"Instead of being like, 'This is what this kind of person would say,' I was like, 'Here's what I would say in this kind of situation'" (Riley, "White Lines" 25).

The movie's implicit criticisms of Detroit and especially Cash are therefore, by implication, self-criticisms that the filmmaker directs against himself.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The malfunctioning garage door at Cassius's uncle's house spontaneously opens, exposing the lovers to the outside world.



Cassius's newly renovated and tastefully decorated loft apartment in the Cathedral Building in downtown Oakland is a far cry from the converted garage that he previously called home.



When Cassius moves back into his uncle's garage at the end of the film, he decorates it in the same style as the swanky downtown loft he inhabited as a Power Caller.

Resolutions and reversals

The arc of Cash's character development over the course of the film is important in this regard. Although he starts the film dejected and unemployed and then becomes a telemarketing magnate, Cassius ends the film as a working-class hero. His itinerary follows a classic dialectical progression.

These three stages in the protagonist's development have visual analogs in his living quarters. The movie's hilarious second scene, for instance, is set in what appears to be a cramped bedroom with walls decorated from floor to ceiling with photographs, posters, and memorabilia. Detroit and Cash lie in bed talking about mortality and the meaning of life, or lack thereof. She tries to ease her boyfriend's existential crisis first by suggesting that he try to live in the moment and then by kissing him and straddling him while pulling off her T-shirt. Just at the moment her shirt comes off, though, the wall behind her swings open to reveal a half-dozen people strolling by on a sunny day. We realize at this point that what we took to be a bedroom is in fact a suburban garage. "Get a room!" a passerby yells at the half-dressed couple. "I got a room, motherfucker!" Cash defensively hollers back as he pulls down the garage door.

About 45 minutes later in the film, after Cassius lands Worry Free the company's multimillion-dollar contract with the Japanese cell phone manufacturer, a montage sequence showing Cash's change of fortune concludes with a backward tracking shot that reveals the newly renovated and tastefully decorated loft apartment that Cassius now calls home. Finally, at the end of the film, after Cassius has quit his job as a Power Caller and helped his former coworkers create "a new and glorious telemarketers' union" that he hopes to join, he returns to his uncle's garage. However, when he lifts the garage door to enter his old abode, we see that the place has the same furniture and artwork and has been painted in the same shade of white as his swanky downtown loft. A perfect transposition of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis version of the dialectic into cinematic images, each of Cassius's dwellings gives crisp visual form to a stage in his development.

Moreover, each transition in this progression from one stage to the next is marked by a dialectical reversal. The first such reversal occurs in the movie's first scene, when Mr. Anderson (Robert Longstreet) interviews Cassius for a job at Regal View. Looking over Cassius's CV, Anderson remarks that, according to his resumé, Cassius was manager of the Rusty Scupper restaurant for five years and a teller at the Bank of Oakland between 2014 and 2016. When Anderson, sounding suitably impressed, notes that Cassius was employee of the month at the bank, the job seeker proudly displays the framed "Employee of the Month" photo that he has been clutching to his chest since the beginning of the interview. Anderson then comments:

"That is intriguing, mainly because I was the branch manager at the Bank of Oakland between 2014 and 2016, and you, Mr. Green, you never fucking worked there."

At this point, Cassius's facial expression, which gradually changed from nervous apprehension to hopeful optimism over the previous half-dozen shots, turns to resigned defeat.



Cassius proudly displays his counterfeit "Employee of the Month" plaque to Mr. Anderson in the film's opening scene.



"Stick to the script," Anderson tells the newly hired Cash while pointing to the "S.T.T.S." sign that abbreviates the Regal View mantra.



The Regal View pep-talk scene rides the line between satire and almost documentary-like realism. "We have all been through stuff like this," Riley says in his audio commentary on the scene, "these bullshit pep talks where [...] they're trying to get you excited about making money for them" ("Commentary with Director").



Cassius exposes Worry Free's unethical labor practices on as many TV shows as will have him.

The interviewer then gives what sounds like the final turn of the screw:

"The number that you gave to the Rusty Scupper restaurant, is that your friend Salvador's number, the same Salvador who applied for this job?"

Like the crestfallen interviewee, the spectator assumes at this point that the interview is essentially over. Cassius has been caught out on his lies. There is no way he is going get the job. Anderson then changes his tone.

"You know what this bootleg trophy tells me? It tells me the only thing I need to know. You have initiative and you can read."

Cassius's dishonesty, which looked to be a liability, turns out to be an asset in the telemarketing business. Anderson hires him on the spot.

The second milestone in the telemarketer's professional itinerary follows the same general logic as this first scene. Set immediately after the first work stoppage at Regal View, the scene takes place in the same cramped office where Anderson first interviewed Cash. Squeeze had warned people that management would likely single out some employees and threaten their jobs after the work stoppage. Assuming that he has been summoned to the managers' office to be fired, Cassius beats the managers to the punch and summarily quits, giving each of them the finger. "No, no, no, no, no, no, Mr. Green," Anderson interrupts. "We're the bearers of good news." Rather than being sacked, Cash is getting a promotion. The people "upstairs" have noticed his stellar job performance and want to elevate him to the rank of Power Caller. The scene that promised to end the telemarketer's career turns out to be the one that catapults him to the top tier of the telemarketing hierarchy.

Finally, the third major stage in the protagonist's narrative progression gives rise to the most disheartening moment in the film. Unlike the first two stages, which shift from bad news to good, this one moves in the opposite direction. It begins when Cassius finally develops a conscience and decides that he can no longer abet a company that turns people into beasts of burden. Making appearances on the popular *I Got the S#*@ Kicked Out of Me* reality TV show, the *Freddie Thorn* show, *Breakfast with America*, and *Live Talk with Jimmy*, Cassius leaks a video of Steve Lift threatening to turn a group of equisapiens into glue if they do not heed him. "I want the world to know that they're manipulating humanity for the sake of profit," Cassius tells his listeners. "We cannot let this go on. You have to call your congressman," he pleads with the audience. "Call your local politicians and let them know we will not stand for this." At this point, the scene cuts to press coverage on a barely disguised version of CNN, where a reporter delivers the following news:

"It's been one day since the viral celebrity leaked to the world new scientific achievements made by Worry Free and their genius CEO, Steve Lift, which caused Worry Free stocks to skyrocket at a rate faster than any other company in history."

As film critic Madeleine Wall observes, this scenario is "all too depressingly believable" (75). An example of the "cynical reason" that, according to German philosopher and cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk, typifies the post-1960s era, the transformation of a revelation about unethical labor practices into a boom in



In a depressingly believable miniature plot development, both Democratic and Republican senators join Steve Lift to celebrate the "record stock market rally Worry Free's success has created."



"Steve Lift is Jesus," proclaims a religious cult in the wake of news that the CEO found a way to turn people into horses.



In a refreshing depiction of cross-sector solidarity, equisapiens and picketing telemarketers join forces in the movie's climactic confrontation between capital and labor.



In the film's second ending, which reverses the "happy resolution" (Torchin) to the film's narrative contradictions, Cassius realizes to his horror that he is transforming into an equisapien.

stock prices exemplifies the "enlightened false consciousness" Sloterdijk analyzes in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (5).

Contributing to the depressing believability of the scene, Riley has both Democratic and Republican senators appear on the news show to celebrate the "record stock market rally Worry Free's success has created." The event that looked like it might bring about Steve Lift's downfall turns into a decisive victory for the arch-capitalist.

Fortunately, there remain a few more reversals in the story. In the movie's climactic confrontation between capital and labor, the picketing Regal View protestors, with help from local football players, manage to repel the scabs who attempt to cross the picket line. When private security forces hired by Regal View then appear on the scene to break up the demonstration, equisapiens come to the picketing telemarketers' rescue, thwarting the police-for-hire and forcing Regal View to the bargaining table.] A refreshing and inspiring depiction of solidarity across sectors, the manual laborers represented by the equisapiens and the retail salespeople at Regal View see common cause and, together, triumph over the capitalist juggernaut.

The film then presents what Leshu Torchin calls "three stages of an ending":

"First up is the happy resolution: Cash joins the Telemarketer's Union; all is well. But as he enters his apartment with Detroit, there comes a sign of his imminent transformation into Equisapien, a horrific reminder of capitalism's capacity to intrude into the home and the body. A smash cut to the film's credits suggests that this is the end, but no. There is a final sequence in which the Equisapien Cash, no longer alone, rings Lift through the intercom. 'Sorry to bother you' he begins, before smashing the camera and entering Lift's home" (Torchin 36).

I have little to add to this account of the film's three-stage ending, other than an additional dialectical twist that lies hidden like an Easter egg in the movie's closing credits. Following a list of the hundreds of people who contributed to the film's production appear the words: "Copyright © 2018 Worry Free. LLC. All rights reserved."

Just to clarify, six production companies were involved in the film's production, and three distribution companies hold rights to the film's distribution. None of them is called "Worry Free." Whether this name refers to a fictive copyright holder or an ironically named entity that really does hold the film's copyright is immaterial. In either case, the name adds a final ironic twist to an already topsyturvy plot, making the film's open-ended conclusion even more ambiguous than critics have given Riley credit for.

In a piece published in the *New York Times Magazine*, for example, Jonah Weiner remarks:

"Riley ends the film on a note of volatility, introducing disconcerting new information in the closing seconds and then leaving this, and one of the film's major antagonisms, unresolved."

Weiner is referring here to Cassius's surprise arrival at Lift's residence following the cut to the film's credits (the third ending Torchin identifies above), but his sense of how "disconcerting" and "unresolved" the ending is would undoubtedly only be intensified by the suggestion that the film itself is a Worry Free production.

Otherwise, in a highly original interpretation of the movie's ending, Alice Maurice argues:



According to Alice Maurice's clever interpretation of the movie's third ending, the Equisapien production logo that closes the film functions as an anti-MGM logo.

"Interrupting the credits this way [with Cash's equisapien roar] suggests a hostile corporate takeover that goes beyond the upending of the fictional 'Worry-Free.' It comes complete with a new—and cinematic—logo. Riley's roaring horse is the anti-MGM lion, ending the film (rather than beginning it) with a powerful roar" (Maurice 36).

This wonderfully playful interpretation, according to which the film would be an Equisapien production (or whatever name we want to give to the fictive film studio with the roaring horse logo) directed against a major studio like MGM, is in keeping with both the film's ludic tone and its cultural politics.

The supplementary reversal made by the suggestion that the movie is, in fact, a Worry Free production would, then, extend the film's dialectical movement into the final seconds of the closing credits. Although this interpretation has the consequence of letting capital win in the end, it also serves to remind us that the battle against the forces of private capital continues. There is no happy end, the Worry Free copyright at the end of the film suggests, just successive stages in an ongoing struggle.

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The movie's final dialectical twist lies hidden in the closing credits in the form of a copyright holder ironically called "Worry Free."

Friedrich Engels asserted nearly a century and a half ago that for dialectical philosophy, "nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything" (12). In this spirit, the *Sorry to Bother You* ending that follows the ending that interrupts the ending that reverses the ending that resolves the film's narrative contradictions presents itself as a tongue-incheek solution to the problem of bringing this dialectical film to a close.

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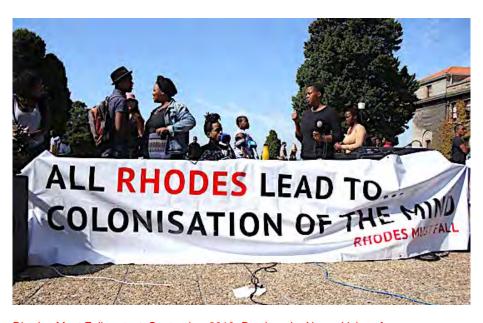
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#OscarMustFall: on refusing to give power to unjust definitions of "merit"

by Dale Hudson



Rhodes Must Fall protest, September 2019. Pambazuka News: Voices for Freedom and Justice.

In March 2015, students across South Africa continued work begun by a generation that sacrificed secondary-school education to fight Apartheid. The Rhodes Must Fall movement galvanized efforts to decolonize curricula. That summer, students across the United States joined the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, raising questions that White and other not-Black people might not see Black victims of police violence because Black perspectives have been erased from education. They also lack knowledge about Black contributions to ending slavery and winning civil rights. U.S. presidents Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson signed anti-slavery and anti-racism legislation. They did not initiate it, yet they are included in school and university curricula whereas Black contributions to arts and sciences are not.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

With social media, student protests become memes, asking administrators and faculty a central question:

"Why is your history part of the core curriculum and mine an elective?"

They cite Simone de Beauvoir, Angela Davis, and Paulo Freire, refusing to accept what Jonathan Harris's painting *Critical Race Theory* (2021) makes literal: a whitewashing of Black history. A White man rolls white paint over images of activists Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.. [2] Some



Ava DuVernay's feature-length documentary, 13th, gives the history of mass incarceration of Black men in the U.S. and forced carceral labor. It is not a topic taught in many schools. As an African American director known for her film Selma, she was asked by Netflix to make a documentary on topic of her choice. This is what she chose.



Jonathan Harris's *Critical Race Theory* (2021) as viral image. Image shared on social media.

university administrators struggle to understand connections between "our [university] curricula" and "their [police] violence." Racism is always elsewhere. Many students and faculty, however, experience and witness palpable, tangible, and undeniable connections between curriculum and violence, often on a daily basis.

This article questions why film educators—alongside critics, distributors, exhibitors, and makers—often describe films and filmmakers as being nominated or winning an Oscar without examining how the awards define merit. The Oscars are one example of White-Western-serving film institutions, including BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) and festivals, including Berlin, Cannes, IDFA (International Documentary Festival Amsterdam), Sundance, and Venice. They must "fall" in the sense that Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues Rhodes must fall in

"a dual process of both deprovincializing Africa, and in turn provincializing Europe."[3]

Film educators need to *provincialize* White-Western-serving institutions and *de-provincialize* a large number of not-White and not-Western ones that define merit in different terms. [4] The Oscars and other major media institutions largely define "merit" in ways that disempower and even delegitimize perspectives that call into question their power. Education needs to prepare students for a world that is not only more interdependent, but also more divisive with the rise of nationalism and more dangerous with the climate crisis, income inequality, and pandemics. Since university "diversity and inclusion" schemes can be counterproductive, film educators—graduate teaching assistants, instructors, lecturers, professors—can compensate in courses and curricula.

Institutional responses can add to the problem



White privilege and the curriculum's hierarchies of core and elective course. Image shared on social media.

Decolonizing film has a long history. [5] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam proposed polycentrism as a mode to organize the field, which takes on a new urgency after the Cold War's three options (capitalism, socialism, non-alignment) have been reduced to one: neoliberalism. [6] When U.S. film education emphasizes technical achievement, star system, and popular genres, while ignoring labor conditions and trade agreements, it allows a commercial industry to set the terms. Despite increased screen presence of not-White characters in Hollywood films and of not-Western films in introductory textbooks, unacknowledged bias continues to

Three whitewashed ideas of merit-worthy filmmaking:



La La Land (USA/Hong Kong, 2016; dir. Damien Chazelle



Inglourious Basterds (Germany/USA, 2009; dir. Quentin Tarantino).



Caché (France/Austria/Germany/Italy, 2005; dir. Michael Haneke), though this one actually confronts whitewashing history.

structure film education, which cannot be corrected with administrator-run syllabi workshops that revamp old curricula. Adding 1980s Hong Kong and 1990s Bollywood cinema, for example, only make the ongoing exclusion of Chinese and South Asian film *history* more conspicuous. The film studies curriculum still avoids confronting media judgments that disqualify films and filmmakers from a prominent place in classroom introductions to the field.

In contrast, Usha Iyer proposes "radical praxis from multiple locations" that rejects "a one-time or a one-size-fits-all fix" for "a proliferation of demands, manifestoes, and countermanifestos that become impossible to ignore," particularly in universities where we need

"an undercommons of killjoys, a coalition of complainers that chip away, course after course, at occupying academic structures." [7]

Locations need to resist being reduced to quantitative data on administrative spreadsheets. Reframing film history as arthouse, Bollywood, Hallyuwood, Hollywood, and Nollywood films, for example, still excludes the vast majority of perspectives. It still focuses only on feature-length narrative films for commercial markets, underscoring how *representational diversity and inclusion* appear to solve problems but thwart decolonizing knowledge, especially when faculty are unaware of structural biases within each of these industries.

When such issues are not addressed in education, they disseminate into the world, shaping film criticism, distribution, and exhibition. General audiences use the Oscars as shorthand for merit. Oscar-awarded or nominated films often appear on the covers of introductory textbooks that are unmarked introductions to White-Western filmmaking. Educators can reframe teaching to emphasize that Oscars are not *the* universal or global definition of merit, but *a* particular and local one. Rather than an unequivocal accolade, an Oscar can suggest pandering to a White-Western industry or betraying a not-White and/or not-Western community. Such an idea might be offensive to Hollywood élites, but it is one that students need to consider.

Academy apologists define the Oscars as industry awards with no obligation towards social injustice. For them, Hollywood is "just entertainment" or "just showbiz"—and everyone "loves" Hollywood films. The apologists ignore unfair advantages and unearned privilege. Hollywood thrives on the illusion of competition, and the Oscars are designed to convince audiences that Hollywood films are objectively better than most films from elsewhere. The awards even include the category of foreign-language/international film, which signals merit for films that don't merit inclusion in the awards' unmarked categories.

Diversity programs can whitewash the status quo



Hattie McDaniel as Mammy gives Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) the side-eye in *Gone with the Wind* (USA, 1939; dir. Victor Fleming).

Academy president Cheryl Boone Issacs claimed to expand membership and implement quotas "aggressively," yet Oscar's new "diversity" criteria on "representation and inclusion" is inadequate. [8] If the Academy had been serious, it would have acted when legal immigration expanded in 1965 or when Affirmative Action became law in 1973. [9] Rehabilitating the Oscars now mainly serves to whitewash the impressions nominated films might make. Looking carefully at the Oscar's official changes, Maggie Hennefeld finds "notoriously racist films" can "easily satisfy the new 'Standard A: On-Screen Representation, Themes and Narratives'"; it

"merely requires that a film's actors or subject matter promote the visibility of an underrepresented group, as if 'visibility' were inherently positive." [10]

"Visibility" just means representational inclusion that can be tokenistic and even reinforce negative stereotypes. Hennefeld concludes:

"Simply put, these diversity indulgences are largely a publicity stunt. They'll be used to exonerate future nominees from accusations of discrimination while providing cover for the Academy itself." [11]

Change like this has nonetheless been decried. Kirstie Alley called it a "dictatorial" tactic to curb "freedom of UNBRIDLED artistry." [12] Michael Caine suggested not-White actors need to "be patient" and wait their turn. By universalizing his White experience, he imagined racism no longer exists. As he put it,

"Of course, it will come. It took me years to get an Oscar, years." [13]

In the same vein, Charlotte Rampling believed boycotting the Oscars for its racism is "racist against whites." [14] Catherine Deneuve said Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement to end sexual harassment—or vigorous and confident "flirting," as she

Images from Gone with the Wind:





Mammy endures Scarlett.



Mammy performs happiness.



Mammy snickers.

characterized it—went too far.[15] Such media figures as Alley, Cain, Rampling, and Deneuve have no issues with a system that benefits Whiteness.

Furthermore, focusing on what the Oscars *exclude* detracts from what they *include*—what is meant by "best." Black actors win when they portray racists stereotypes. As Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (USA, 1939; dir. Victor Fleming), Hattie McDaniel was the first to win one in 1940. Her win broke no barriers for others. She was an outlier. Eugene Franklin Wong describes racial segregation and stratification that determine who appears together on screen and who can work together on set.[16] Nancy Wang Yuen describes it as "reel inequity."[17] As Latonja Snickler expains,

"In allowing the film industry and Hollywood to disregard Title VII [of the Civil Rights Act of 1964], society has allowed these industries to perpetuate a system that favors one race over others." [18]

The point is that segregation and inequality are not solved by representational diversity and inclusion. Hollywood inserts not-White actors in non-stereotyped supporting roles—judges, police officers, and teachers—that serve a White-dominated system in what Sharon Willis calls "guest figures." [19] Hollywood films appear diverse and inclusive while social structures of Whiteness remain.

Over Oscar's 93 years, only 14 Black women and 24 Black men have been nominated for leading actor awards. Only six have been nominated as directors. Oscar myths dictate that exceptional not-White and not-Western people will "rise" to its merit. However, as #OscarsSoWhite founder April Reign describes the awards, they are less meritocracy than popularity contest. Academy members are not required to screen films before voting and award films and filmmakers that reflect their particular ideas about filmmaking and the world. By 2014 with over 86 years and 344 awards for acting, Oscar awarded only 24 (or 7%) to not-White actors; moreover,

"Arabs or Muslims are often portrayed as terrorists, African Americans as criminals such as drug dealers, Latinos as criminals such as gang members, and Whites as victims or heroes." [20]

Such statistics are expected. Until recently, Academy voting members were 94% White and 76% male with an average age of 63, that is,

"older and more dude-heavy than just about any place in America [sic] and Whiter than all but seven states." [21]

Membership reflects social power asymmetries, but even representational diversity and inclusion among membership is not a guaranteed solution. Some not-White and/or not-Western people are racist, and some women are sexist. Identities and politics align in complex ways. Affirmative Action disproportionately benefits White women because it flattens social difference to allows the most powerful to exploit systems. Olúfémi Táíwò describes such institutional appropriations and exploitations of "identity politics" as a

"tactic of performing symbolic identity politics to pacify protestors without enacting material reform" or "elite capture." [22]

Institutions use diversity and inclusion most effectively to whitewash their own histories.[23] Educational institutions employ representational categories without challenging disciplinary structures, which can be an counterproductive as hiring neoliberal economists from the former Third World rather than hiring Third

Worldist economists. They maintain a status quo.

Feigned ignorance is still racism



Daniel Kaluuya as Chris Washington, experiencing the Sunken Place of liberal White folks in *Get Out!* (USA, 2017; dir. Jordan Peele).

When asked about Hollywood's "most insidious and insulting type of racism," Wendall Pierce mentioned,

"the feigned ignorance' of white industry members regarding finding talented directors, actors, and writers of color." [24]

Comparably, Rosie Perez considers her "biggest struggle [in Hollywood] has been navigating through other people's shortcomings," especially "other people's bigotry, racism—and specifically the ones that don't understand that they are bigots or racists."[25] *Hollywood Reporter* offers candid insights into what Academy voters think but won't say publicly. About *Get Out!* (USA, 2017; dir. Jordan Peele), one confessed:

"what bothered me afterwards was that instead of focusing on the fact that this was an entertaining little horror movie that made quite a bit of money, they started trying to suggest it had deeper meaning than it does, and, as far as I'm concerned, they played the race card, and that really turned me off." [26]

Sexualized racism is a theme that the film actually addresses. Thus, the member's insecurity over Peele's film *both* making "quite a bit of money" *and* containing "deeper meaning" would be amusing, were it not so racist.

The same member felt uncomfortable that Daniel Kaluuya who, he said,

"is not from the United States, was giving us a lecture on racism in America [sic] and how black lives matter, and I thought, 'What does this have to do with Get Out? They're trying to make me think that if I don't vote for this movie, I'm a racist.' I was really offended."

Academy members do like some foreigners. They admired Winston Churchill, subject of a biopic that year. He is a hero in Britain and villain in India, where his extraction of food contributed to a famine killing millions. [27] Critics, educators, and scholars need to ask themselves whether they feign ignorance that such comments do not reflect, in part, how Oscar merit is determined.

Such scrutiny is not new. People magazine declared a "Hollywood blackout" in

Images from Get Out!:



Predatory White gaze of Philomena King (Geraldine Singer) onto LaKeith Stanfield as Andre Logan King in *Get Out!*



Dead gaze of Betty Gabriel as Georgina in Get Out!



Daniel Kaluuya as Chris Washington, feeling threatened by liberal White folks in *Get Out!*



The liberal White man Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford), auctioning Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) as a slave in *Get Out!*



"Bingo!" in Get Out!

1996. Esther Breger explains:

"The 68th Academy Awards, hosted by Whoopi Goldberg and produced by Quincy Jones, were two weeks away, and the magazine used its audience of nearly 4 million subscribers to announce a shocking discovery. Of the 166 Oscar nominees that year, only one was black." [28]

The Black nominee was Dianne Houston for *Tuesday Morning Ride* (USA, 1995). At that time, Jesse Jackson organized a protest outside ABC affiliates, broadcasting the ceremony in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington. He was stigmatized as a troublemaker.

Jacqueline Keeler defines Whites-only nominations for acting in 2016, repeating 2015, as a "symptom of Hollywood's racism." [29] She finds "no Oscar nominations for Native American actors or filmmakers or writers" in the award's 86 years. [30] Oscars recognize Indigenous people when they appear in films by Whites, such as Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (USA/Hong Kong/Taiwan, 2015). Because he is Mexican, Iñárritu's nomination makes the Oscars appear inclusive. The Oscars adore the "three amigos"—Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro, and Alfonso Cuarón—who, Deborah Shaw notes, make films *outside* México yet "take on the role of advocates and ambassadors for the national film industry." [31] They win Best Director constantly, helping Oscar deflect criticisms. As Jorge Cotte noted about *Roma* (México/USA, 2018),

"If Cuarón were a white American or European, a depiction of an indigenous woman that shored up so many parts of his family's life would have been even more vulnerable to critical eyes." [32]

Feigned ignorance extends to not noticing that Oscars rewards Whites and Westerners for appropriating not-White and not-Western stories, such as *Gandhi* (UK/India/USA, 1982; dir. Richard Attenborough) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (UK/USA, 2008; dir. Danny Boyle). The films refocus attention back on White filmmakers. Yasmina Price argues White filmmakers make neocolonial films about Africa when trying to critique neocolonialism.[33] Occasional awards go to not-White and not-Western filmmakers for films about White-Western people, notably Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (USA/Canada, 2002) and Zhoé Zhao's *Nomadland* (USA, 2020).[34] Feigned ignorance extends to the kinds of not-Western stories that Oscars notices. With its precocious young girl, *The Present* (UK/Palestine, 2020; dir. Farah Nabulsi) did, much as *Wadjda* (Germany/Saudi Arabia, 2012; dir. Haifaa Al Mansour) had. Only Arab girls, who appear to act like White girls by defying what White women consider Arab and/or Muslim patriarchy, win Oscar nominations.







Maryam Kanj as Yasmin, performing

"relatable" girlhood by riding a bicycle in an abaya in *Wadjda* (Germany/Saudi Arabia, 2012; dir. Haifaa Al Mansour).

"relatable" girlhood by ignoring IDF checkpoint in *The Present* (UK/Palestine, 2020; dir. Farah Nabulsi).

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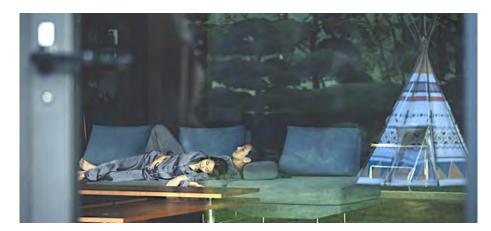


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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Universal" stories are another form of racism and imperialism



Americana in the form of settler colonial appropriation of the teepee in *Gisaengchung/Parasite* (South Korea, 2019; dir. Bong Joon-ho).

The longest serving presidents of Hollywood's trade association, the Motion Picture Association, William Hayes and Jack Valenti, inaugurated industry propaganda that Hollywood films are the best in the world because their stories are supposedly universal. John Tomlinson argues that

"claims to universality, in short, nearly always relate to some project of domination: it is very rare that the model of 'essential humanity' is taken from an alien culture." [35] [open endnotes in new window]

Hollywood's self-definition of its stories as universal functions like a "cultural bomb," which Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as

"annihilat[ing] a people's belief in their names, their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.[36]

He argues that universalism is imperialism, making its victims "see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement" and "makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland."[37] "Amidst this wasteland," he notes, "imperialism presents itself as the cure." Chinua Achebe also considered universalism to have a function as escapism, asking:

"if [African] writers should opt for such escapism, who is to meet the challenge [of decolonizing the mind]?"[38]

Appeals to universalism naturalize racism and imperialism. Universalism guides Oscar's awards for not-White and not-Western films, generally favoring those that tell so-called universal (i.e., whitewashed) stories. In 2020, Bong Joon-ho's *Gisaengchung/Parasite* (South Korea, 2019) won Best Picture, allegedly transcending its particularity as Korean or Asian to become universal. Bong won Best Director but was unimpressed, as was Youn Yuh-jung, who won Best Supporting Actress.[39] In fact, the Academy recognized *Parasite* partly due to transnational corporate structures.[40] *Parasite*'s win raised concerns that it

Images from Parasite:



Kim Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), performing the "American Indian" in *Gisaengchung/Parasite*.



Kim Ki-woo aka Kevin (Choi Woo-shik) and Kim Ki Jung aka Jessica (Park So-dam), finding mobile reception in *Gisaengchung/Parasite*.



Middle-class parents, Park Dong-ik aka Nathan (Lee Sun-kyun) and Choi Yeon-gyo aka Madame (Cho Yeo-jeong), in *Gisaengchung/Parasite*.



Working-class parents, Kim Ki-taek (Song Kangho) and Kim Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin), in *Gisaengchung/Parasite*.

diminished media attention to not-White actors, but Brian Hu argues that Korean American communities created a U.S. market for Korean films.[41] Journalists speculated that *Parasite*'s win marked a watershed moment, as they had two decades earlier when *Ngo foo chong lung/Wo hu cang long/Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (USA/China/Hong Kong/Taiwan, 2000; dir. Ang Lee) won Best Foreign-language Film. Different generations experience their own exhilaration since Hollywood lures with fantasies that the watershed moments are real.

Henry Aray observes the Academy favors "high-income countries," noting that "50 out of 72 Oscars for [foreign-language film] have been awarded to EU [European Union] countries."[42] Promoted by Oscar awards to local productions in this category, high-income White-majority states offer potentially lucrative markets for Hollywood films. Aray finds Oscar nominations less helpful in establishing local film industries in medium- or low-income countries.[43] Academy bureaucracy works against not-Western films. Oscar's bylaws include requirements such as "paid admission in a commercial motion picture theater in Los Angeles County." Documentary features require seven-day commercial runs in New York. Countries are limited to "only one picture," giving small states like Germany, France, Japan, and South Korea an unfair advantage over large ones like China, India, and Nigeria. Moreover, transnational funding renders the archaic term "international" meaningless. France's Unifrance boasts "almost a quarter of the 93 films submitted by the candidate countries" nominated for Best International Feature in 2022 were French co-productions.[44]

Oscar-nominated films require high production values and stories that do not require understanding by cultural content. In this regard, Paul McDonald finds Disney's acquisition of Miramax in 1993 contributed to an "Indiewoodization" of foreign-language film, driven by minimizing risk and maximizing profit.[45] The category "foreign" essentially became a way for Hollywood distributors (aka "studios") to outsource production. In that process, Harvey Weinstein earned the moniker "Harvey Scissorhands" for his extensive reediting of "foreign" films.[46]

It might be more useful to teach students about different filmmaking practices and histories. Lampooned by Western critics, Nigeria's film industry Nollywood is now the world's second largest. Audiences were fine with lower production values in early Nollywood films since the stories were Nigerian. Nollywood rejected the racism and imperialism of Hollywood's supposed universal stories, though it also colonizes internally, privileging the "international" English-language films over ones in "regional" languages of Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and others.

Not-Western filmmaking is beyond Oscar expertise



Subir Banerjee as Apu, looking in a mirror and imitating folk theater in *Pather Panchali* (India, 1955; dir. Satyajit Ray).



Apu enchanted by folk theater in *Pather Panchali*.

Images from Pather Panchali:



Folk theater performance in Pather Panchali.





Apu listens to British band playing for a wedding in *Pather Panchali*.

Stam and Shohat explain,

"The yearly Oscar ceremonies inscribe Hollywood's arrogant provincialism. The audience is global yet the product promoted is almost always American, the 'rest of the world' being corralled into the ghetto of the 'foreign film." [47]

Only 22 films without English dialogues or U.S. funding have been nominated for Best Picture. Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Project restores (feature-length, mostly narrative) films from around the world, yet his personal "best 125 films of all time" includes only four by not-Western filmmakers, all Japanese, and none directed by women. [48] Scorsese is not an outlier. [49]

Hollywood maximizes its profit by protecting its home market (Canada and United States) and opening other markets by aggressively advocating for so-called free trade. After agriculture, petroleum, weapons, and pharmaceuticals, Hollywood entertainment is a substantial portion of U.S. exports. During the 1993 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations, United States argued that films were just products like automobile and missiles. France argued for a "cultural exception" since film held cultural value and should be exempted from free trade.[50]

At the same time, the U.S. government acknowledges films are more than products, having cultural value as soft power and propaganda. In 1927, the Motion Picture Department within the Department of Commerce was established, so films could act as "silent salesmen" for other U.S. products. [51] Under Will H. Hayes, the Motion Picture Producers and Directors Association (MPPDA, later MPAA) secured State Department intervention in overseas markets in the 1920s. [52] Indeed, the MPPDA's subsidiary, the Motion Picture Export Association of America, was often called the "Little State Department." [53] Synergies of industry and state promote and export U.S. national exceptionalism today through Film International and American Documentary Showcase.

Hollywood has prioritized overseas markets since the 1920s, but its films are not consumed because they are "better," as industry heads insist. Hollywood partnered with the U.S. government, particularly during the 1940s after European and Japanese film industries were destroyed by war. Hollywood opposes individual countries' protectionist policies, such as national import quotas or taxes. At the same time, the U.S. exhibition market is de facto protected by distributors and exhibitors. Nevertheless, Hollywood discredits foreign competition with belittling epithets, such as "Hollywood on the Nile" (Cairo) or "Hollywood of the East" (Shanghai, then Hong Kong).[54] Filmfare is belittled as the "Indian Oscars"; Premio Ariel, the "Mexican Oscars." Even fellow Westerners cannot escape Oscar's shadow: Césars become "French Oscars"; Ophirs, "Israeli Oscars."

The Oscars prioritizes *form* over *content* to train audiences to dismiss films without Hollywood's production values and resources. Julio Garcia Espinosa argued that "perfect cinema—technically and artistically masterful—is almost always reactionary cinema," perfectly characterizing Oscar ideas of merit.[55] Prejudice can be internalized. Satyajit Ray criticized Bombay's film industry for imitating Hollywood. He refused to accept "high technical polish" as merit.[56] His *Pather Panchali* (India, 1955) was awarded "best human document" at Cannes and applauded as "dramatized documentary" and "timeless humanism" at the Flaherty Film Seminar.[57] These institutions ignored the merit of Ray's meticulous storyboarding, adaptation of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel, and use of Ravi Shankar's music. They ignored his engagements with Vittorio de Sica, Jean Renoir, and Billy Wilder, perhaps presuming a Bengali filmmaker would not know them, and his references to Indian arts. The Oscars only seem

notice not-Western filmmakers when they prioritize legibility to White-Western audiences.





Ravi Shankar music in dialogue with nature in *Pather Panchali*.

Satyajit Ray's composition of nature in *Pather Panchali*.





Apu explores fields in Pather Panchali.

Apu hears electricity in Pather Panchali.

Alternatives modes exist. In this regard, Mahen Bonetti and Carlos A. Gutiérrez programmed African and Latin American films as "South of the Other" for the Flaherty Seminar. [58] They "othered" the Global North. They invited filmmakers whose work exceeded the neoliberal globalist imagination, including Dante Cerano, Ximena Cuevas, Theo Eshetu, Mahamat Saleh Haroun, and Moussa Sene Absa, whose films could not mistake as documentary or ethnographic, as Ray's *Pather Panchali* had been. However, the Flaherty Seminar and Cannes are relatively unknown by many audiences, who associate merit with the Oscars. Audiences do not understand that the Oscars' raison d'être is to promote Hollywood, thus rendering it unqualified to evaluate not-Western filmmaking.

Oscar "merit" hides Hollywood's (unmarked) power



Salt of the Earth's premiere at only cinema in New York that would screen the film.

Oscar is a colloquial expression for the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' awards for "artistic and technical merit." Verified by accountants, Academy bylaws are classical Hollywood-style fantasies of meritocracy that exclude the context of inequality. Hollywood myths of competition and meritocracy also undercut organized labor. The Oscars were designed to transform labor into "arts and sciences," thereby short-circuiting workers' protection by unions and guilds. [59] In Hollywood's golden era, studio heads thwarted efforts to regulate the industry. The film industry moved from New Jersey to California in the 1910s partly as a maneuver around antitrust laws. Hollywood later bypassed the Paramount Decree (1948), outlawing the vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition. Hollywood studios historically worked against facing competition and rather presented their monopoly as competition. As Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin explain,

"Hollywood films are sometimes discussed as 'art' by critics and some filmmakers. But Hollywood film's merit is chiefly judged by its box office revenue." [60]

Hollywood operates according to myths of market solutions without even acknowledging the state support that it receives. Scholarship shows that taxpayer monies subsidize Hollywood. [61]

April Reign's #OscarsSoWhite notes disproportionate numbers of White (and Western) nominees, revealing about how Oscars' definition of merit conceals industry connections and social privilege. Oscar apologists recite industry myths that Oscars bring audiences, launch careers, enhance professionalization, uplift standards—all of which are part of a broader White-Western liberalism that Ijeoma Oluo describes as "centered around preserving white male power regardless of white male skill or talent." [62] Preserving this power, she argues, is a form of ensuring mediocrity since it "limits the drive and imagination of white men" and

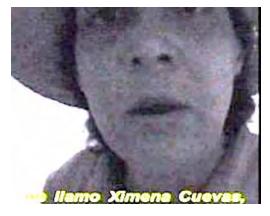
"requires forced limitations on the success of women and people of color in order to deliver on the promised white male supremacy." [63]

Sarah Ahmed argues that "meritocracy is the fantasy that those who are selected

South of the Other:



Dia 2/Day 2 (México, 2004; dir. Dante Cerano).



Contemporary Artist (México, 1999; dir. Ximena Cuevas).



Africanized (Ethiopia/Italy, 2001; dir. Theo Eshetu).



Bye Bye Africa (Chad/France, 1999; dir. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun).

are best," yet this fantasy "allows the system to recede from view," and "when a system disappears from view, the assistance given by that system also disappears," resulting in an *unmarked inequality* that allows "the selected [to] appear as unassisted by the system." [64] Merit, then, becomes *privilege within membership*—which demands compliance and complicity with a system.

The term "merit" demands such compliance and complicity. Competition allegedly promises opportunity, but most films and filmmakers are excluded from eligibility. Rather than affirming Oscar's power to define merit, educators can deconstruct this power in introductory curricula. Students need to consider how Oscar defines merit to distract from *unfair advantages*, such as industry connections, including nepotism, and *unearned privilege*, whether economic or social. Merit is abstracted and extracted from reality, including the political and social consequences of merit-worthy films that accept racial segregation and gendered glass ceilings. The Oscars define merit in terms of short-term profit without regard for long-term consequences. The Academy recognizes merit in films that reproduce Hollywood's self-definition of a so-called *universal* or *global* model rather than a *particular* or *local* style of filmmaking. It is a White-Western serving institution that ensures that Hollywood retains its power.

Oscars reward White saviors



Victor Banerjee as Dr. Aziz gives Fielding (James Fox) the side-eye in *A Passage to India* (UK/USA, 1984; dir. David Lean).

Mary McNamara argues,

"It's time for Hollywood to stop defining great drama as White men battling adversity...in a world filled with billions of people who are not white men, they are certainly not the only good stories, not by a long shot." [65]

The Oscars are themselves an exercise in White-saviorism with their "implicit messages of white paternalism," what Matthew Hughey calls "whites going the extra mile across the color line." [66] The Oscars presume to rescue Black films and filmmakers from the "obscurity" of Black awards. The Academy cannot fathom that the NAACP Image Awards, Black Reel Awards, and BET Awards have

expertise in evaluating Black filmmaking. Such awards mean much more.







Police violence in Do the Right Thing.

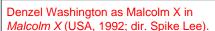
The Academy actually delegitimizes Black perspectives. One of its most pointed "snubs" was not nominating Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (USA, 1989) about White police murdering an unarmed Black man decades before Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi founded #Black Lives Matter and Darnella Frazier filmed George Floyd's murder. The Oscar for Best Picture went to *Driving Miss Daisy* (USA, 1989; dir. Bruce Beresford), offering comfort to White people that racism is located individuals, who are capable of change, so no need for social reform. The Academy also snubbed Lee's *Malcolm X* (USA, 1992) about one of the most important figures in the Civil Rights struggle. When Ava Duvernay was snubbed for *Selma* (UK/USA/France, 2014) about Martin Luther King Jr., Spike Lee questioned Oscar's relevance:

"Nobody's talking about motherfuckin' *Driving Miss Daisy*. That film is not being taught in film schools all across the world like *Do the Right Thing* is. So if I saw Ava today I'd say, 'You know what? Fuck 'em." [67]



Tony Lip (Viggo Mortensen) hijacks an icon of Black history — Victor Hugo Green's *Negro Motorist Green Book* — and takes Dr. Donald Shirley (Mahershala Ali) for a ride in the film *Green Book* (USA, 2018; dir. Peter Farrelly).

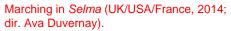






Denzel Washington as Malcolm X in Mekkah in *Malcolm X*.







Solidarity in Selma.



The tragedy of White problems: ennui over unfair advantages and unearned privileged in *Lost in Translation* (USA/Japan, 2003; dir. Sophia Coppola).

When the Oscars overlooks *Malcolm X* and *Selma*, it become difficult to defend the Academy. Oscars go disproportionately to White filmmakers, who are imagined uniquely capable of mainstreaming not-White and not-Western stories to wider audiences by "amplifying" (i.e., appropriating) other people's experiences. Although Satyajit Ray and Ousmane Sembène's narrative features were "mistaken" as documentary, the Oscars seldom consider actual documentary features made by not-White and not-Western filmmakers. During the 2010s, winners for Best Documentary were films by and about Whites with a few exceptions. [68] Caty Borum Chattoo concludes the Oscars prefer White documentarians with Whites directing 87% and producing 91% of nominated features over the past decade; women (all races), directing 25% and producing 42%. [69]

White-Western women win Oscars for documentaries on "raising awareness" (rather than becoming accountable), "women's empowerment" (rather than confronting White-Western patriarchy), and "entrepreneurship" (rather than supporting structural change). The Academy ignores U.S. sexism but is eager to recognize violence against women and honor killing in Pakistan and period poverty in India.[70] Awarded Best Documentary in 2005, *Born into Brothels* (USA, 2004; dir. Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski) established the benchmark for White-saviorism, continuing with *Learning to Skateboard in a Warzone (If You're a Girl)* (UK, 2019; dir. Carol Dysinger) as Best Documentary Short Subject in 2020. Such films mobilize what Purnima Bose calls

"agency in the liberal humanist conception of the subject [that] finds expression in the entrepreneurial self at the heart of neoliberalism." [71]

The Academy also prefers documentaries with stories driven by characters and offering closure that brings "catharsis," a pleasing and privileged feeling that all is or will be well, something impossible for many who suffer trauma. The Academy reduces documentary to a consumable product. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa



Flesh touches flesh and gaze meets gaze: Orientalism's homoerotics in *Lawrence of Arabia* (UK/USA, 1962; dir. David Lean).

Lebow reject

"common-sense wisdom that changing the narrative and telling a different story—or loads of different stories—will be enough." [72]

"Story itself has become part of the problem." [73]

In addition, some of the earliest Oscar-winning documentaries were wartime propaganda as stories, including *The Battle of Midway* (USA, 1942; dir. John Ford) and *Prelude to War* (USA, 1942; dir. Frank Capra).[74]





White gaze as making weapons of war in *Prelude to War* (USA, 1942; dir. Frank Capra).

White fragility, rage, and an examination of masculinity in *The Hurt Locker* (USA, 2008; dir. Kathryn Bigelow).

White saviorism allows the Oscars to diversify with by awarding White women for making nationalist films. Kathryn Bigelow became the first to win Best Director for *The Hurt Locker* (USA, 2008), a film so complicit with U.S. militarism that it is overtly anti-feminist. Lila Abu-Lughod, Saba Mahmood, and Charles Hirschkind find spectacularly choreographed endorsements by Oscar-awarded or nominated actors, including Kathy Bates, Geena Davis, and Lily Tomlin, exemplify how Hollywood is coopted by U.S. militarism and resource extraction under the cover of "saving Muslim women." [75] Bigelow's film lures audiences to weep over White soldiers rather than question White politicians. [76]

Dignity can be the price of Oscar



White gaze in Slumdog Millionaire (UK/USA, 2008; dir. Danny Boyle).

In 2019, Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang published an op-ed in *The New York Times*. Its title quickly changed from "We Need More Critics of Color" to "The Dominance of the White Male Critics." [77] More alarming, its tagline about museum curators and film programmers fighting "white supremacy on the rise" was toned down to

"conversation about our monuments, museums, screens and stages have the same blind spots as our political discourse."

Barry and Yang discussed Best Picture winner *Green Book* (USA, 2018; dir. Peter Farrelly), which received positive reviews from White critics ("a heartwarming triumph over racism") and negative ones from Black critics ("another trite



White gaze in *Born into Brothels* (USA, 2004; dir. Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski).



White gaze in Skateboard in a Warzone (If You're a Girl) (UK, 2019; dir. Carol Dysinger).



A Passage to India (UK/USA, 1984; dir. David Lean). Years after being falsely accused of raping a White woman, Victor Banerjee as Dr. Aziz reluctantly greets the ambivalent ccolonizer Fielding (James Fox), who failed to advocate for him.



Dr. Aziz's children come of age in a free state in

example of the country's insatiable appetite for White-savior narratives").[78] The editorial change echoes what Alex Ruth Bertuli-Fernandes expressed in a tweet about being instructed to "dial down the feminism" in an art class.[79] She posted an image of a dial that could be turned from "raging feminist" to "complicit with my own dehumanization." Felicia Rose Chavez recounts her own experiences as a graduate student as "White allies warned [her] to 'tone it down'," fearing that her "activism" of advocating for "an elective class that featured contemporary writers of color" might annihilate her "professional network." [80]

Requests to tone-down criticism are a form of intimidation. *Green Book* producer Charles B. Wessler outright bullied Jenni Miller over her review of the film:

"African Americans for the most part LOVE this film. [...] I will not go on and on about how wrong you are but you have a big ASS responsibility to write the TRUTH." [81]

Green Book exemplifies the toning down rewarded by the Oscars. Brooke Obie found the film appropriated *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. "Black people don't even touch the *Green Book*, let alone talk about its vital importance to their lives," she noted:

"Instead, the film centers the story of a racist White man who makes an unlikely Black friend on a journey through the American south and becomes slightly less racist." [82]

Barry and Yang argue,

"Uncritical affection for superficially benevolent stories can actually reinforce the racial hierarchies this country is built on. We need culture writers who see and think from places of difference and who are willing to take unpopular positions so that ideas can evolve or die." [83]

Oscar idea of merit obscures more Black films than it highlights. Noting *Losing Ground* (USA, 1982; dir. Kathleen Collins) and *Cane River* (USA, 1982; dir. Horace Jenkins) as "rediscovered" films, Racquel Gates describes Oscar preference for Black pain over Black lives, much less Black joy, asking:

"How many more Black films languish on the verge of disappearance, films that may not have been deemed 'important' because they cared more to focus on the lovely intricacies of Black life rather than delivering Black pain for White consumption?" [84]

"Black film is still too often assessed for its didactic value, with artistic and intellectual contributions deemed secondary." [85]

Gates' assessment echoes what Satyajit Ray experienced. Ray was never nominated for an Oscar. Few Indian films have been: only *Bharat Mata/Mother India* (India, 1957; dir. Mehboob Khan), *Salaam Bombay!* (UK/India/France, 1988; dir. Mira Nair), and *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (India, 2001; dir. Ashutosh Gowariker) in nearly 70 years of considering non-Hollywood films. [86] Despite making most of the world's films, few Indians are Academy members. Resul Pookutty was invited after being noticed for sound mixing in *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film that romanticized Mumbai's Dharavi slum and won Best Picture. Indian filmmakers have made films of Dharavi, including ones who live

A Passage to India.



Fielding (James Fox) counts on Dr. Aziz's (Victor Banerjee) emotional labor in *A Passage to India*.

there, but the Academy favors White perspectives on India.

Before *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Gandhi* won eight Oscars in 1983, including Best Actor, Best Director, and Best Picture. Ben Kingsley, whose father is Guajarati and whose mother is White, won, but Roshan Seth, Saeed Jaffrey, Alyque Padamsee, Amrish Puri, and Rohini Hattangadi were not nominated. Oscar apologist Emanuel Levy laments that *Gandhi* beat *Tootsie* (USA, 1982; dir. Sydney Pollack) and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (USA, 1982; dir. Steven Spielberg).[87] and berates the Oscars for what he calls "PC cultural diversity."[88] David Lean's *A Passage to India* (UK/USA, 1984) gained nominations and wins. Victor Banerjee was not nominated for his role of the falsely accused sexual predator, but Judy Davis was nominated for her role as the fragile White woman, who only retracted her false accusations after the damage had already been done. Banerjee's character Dr. Aziz grows from obsequiously trying to please the British to *refusing* their conditional friendship.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Competition undermines solidarity



"Too much English" in Lionheart (Nigeria, 2018; dir. Genevieve Nnaji).

Myths of competition and meritocracy focus on individualism, undermining solidarities needed for decolonization. The Oscars segregate creative workers with hierarchies of above- and below-the-line labor—and partition with (unmarked English-language) categories from marked foreign-language/international ones. [89][open endnotes in new window] Hollywood frames collective bargaining to protect industry workers—and quotas to protect domestic markets—as "obstacles" to free competition, yet Hollywood panicked when Hong Kong films topped the U.S. box office in the 1970s. The films starred Chinese diasporic actors, including Lo Lieh, Bruce Lee, and Angela Mao, who defeated corrupt White authority figures. Hollywood responded with imitations, starring White men in yellowface, notably David Carradine as Kwai Chang Caine in the television series *Kung Fu* (USA, 1972).



Lieh Lo as Chao Chih-Hao in *Tian xia di yi* quan/Five Fingers of Death (Hong Kong, 1972; dir. Chang-hwa Jeong).



Angela Mao as Miss Tien in Tie zhang xuan feng tui/ Lady Whirlwind aka Deep Thrust: The Hand of Death (Hong Kong, 1972; dir. Feng Huang).







David Carradine in yellowface as Kwai Chang Caine in the television series *Kung Fu* (USA, 1972).



Rosaura Revueltas as Esperanza Quintero, raising hand to lead, in *Salt of the Earth* (USA, 1953; dir. Herbert Biberman).



Men organize across ethno-racial divisions, in *Salt of the Earth*.

Since "neocolonialism needs to convince people of a dependent country of their own inferiority," Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino cautioned Latin American filmmakers from imitating Hollywood. [90] They demystified filmmaking as work, not by "artists," "geniuses," "the privileged," but by "the worker." [91] Organized labor threatens Hollywood. During the era of McCarthyism, *Salt of the Earth* (USA, 1953; dir. Herbert Biberman) was effectively banned for its transgressive themes of transnational solidarity and gendered equality. The filmmakers were "blacklisted" for association with the U.S. Communist Party, which opposed racial segregation and supported labor and civil rights. The Academy promotes myths that anyone can succeed, that skill and talent matter more than connections and privilege. It prefers exceptional individuals, surmounting obstacles against overwhelming odds to become "heroes." Individualism reinforces myths that nothing needs to change except personal mindsets, diminishing the need for collective action to dismantle an unfair system.

Oscar bureaucracy accentuates biases, essentialisms, and eurocentrities. For not-Western films, the primary access to the Oscars is through the Best Foreign-language/International Film category. Countries can nominate one film. *Lionheart* (Nigeria, 2018; dir. Genevieve Nnaji) and *Joy* (Austria, 2018; dir. Sudabeh Mortezai) were disqualified for having "too much" English.[92] Oscar's exclusion of *Be with Me* (Singapore, 2015; dir. Erik Khoo) was ironic in the context of Singapore's own "Speak Good English Movement."[93] Hollywood's imperial politics are apparent in how few films are nominated from postcolonial states and fewer still from occupied nations.

Puerto Rican filmmakers were ineligible in 2011, silencing their perspectives on U.S. imperialism. Palestinian filmmakers have been made ineligible since only "recognized" states can nominate films. Elia Suleiman's *Yadon ilaheyya/Divine Intervention* (France/Morocco/Germany/Palestine, 2002) was deemed a stateless film.[96] The film features a keffiyeh-clad Palestinian woman, who transforms into a flying ninja to defeat IDF soldiers.



Manal Khader navigates the IDF crosshairs in Elia Suleiman's *Yadon ilaheyya/Divine Intervention* (France/Morocco/Germany/ Palestine, 2002).



Kais Nashif as Said, the suited-and-booted suicide bomber on a bus in *Al-Jannah Al-Aan/Paradise Now* (Palestine/France/Germany/Netherlands/Israel, 2005; dir. Hany Abu-Assad).

By contrast, Hany Abu-Assad's *Al-Jannah Al-Aan/Paradise Now* (Palestine/France/Germany/ Netherlands/Israel, 2005) on suicide bombers during the second Intifada was accepted as Palestinian. Under pressure from pro-Israeli members, Palestine was renamed "Palestinian territories." The Academy later accepted Abu-Assad's *Omar* (Palestine, 2013) about Palestinians coerced into becoming Israeli informants as a nomination from Palestine.[95]

In 2017, Bahman Ghobadi asked the Academy CEO Dawn Hudson to consider the regulation's erasure of exiled filmmakers, who cannot count upon a nomination by the state they fled. [96] No such category exists today. The Academy seems prejudiced against films and filmmakers from Muslim countries. Oscar only recognized Iranian cinema in 2012, awarding *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin/A Separation* (Iran, 2011; dir. Asghar Farhadi), which was Iran's second nomination. Israel has had ten. Mizrahi (Arab) Jews in Israel and diasporic Arabs in Europe became finalists. [97]

Arab Muslims in Arab states are not selected. Such omissions contribute to feelings of being *presumed incompetent*, evident in Arab critics, who associate Oscar nominations with merit, arguing that "with better financial support and fewer restraints, Arab films from the Middle East [*sic*] could very well be nominated for Oscars every year. And who knows—maybe soon one will actually win." [98] Other critics understand the Oscars differently. "For what use is an Oscar if it comes at the price of justice, freedom, equality and dignity?" asks Halim Shebaya. [99] When Whites and Westerners celebrate their Oscar wins, they might want to consider whether it comes at the price of someone else's dignity.

Exceptional opportunities can be institutional opportunism



Barbara Streisand as Henry, opening the door but blocking entry to Vivian Bonnell as Loretta in *For Pete's Sake* (USA, 1974; dir. Peter Yates), resignified in *Lip* (USA, 1999; dir. Tracey Moffatt with Gary Hillberg).

During the pandemic's second year, journalists noted that it seemed "like the Oscar nominations never happened" based on what topped Netflix charts, alongside Apple TV, FandangoNOW, and Google Play. [100] The mythical "Oscar bump" of a 30% increase in ticket sales for mid-budget and non-U.S. films from a nomination vanished. [101] Oscar wins for underrepresented groups may do more



Halle Berry as Oscar-worthy "conflation of the sexual siren and the welfare queen" in *Monster's Ball* (USA, 2001; dir. Marc Foster).



Halle Berry, sexualized in *Catwoman* (USA, 2004; dir. Pitof).



Halle Berry, de-racialized as Storm in *X-Men:* Days of Future Past (USA/UK, 2014; dir. Bryan Singer).

for Oscar branding than for the actors' careers. The awards can seem like intuitional opportunism to whitewash history. White actors benefit more from winning an Oscar than Black actors.[102] Brandon Thorp finds only

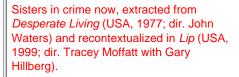
"10 black women have been nominated for best actress, and nine of them played characters who are homeless or might soon become so. (The exception is Viola Davis, for the 2011 drama *The Help* [USA, 2011; dir. Tate Taylor])." [103]

Her nomination for Best Supporting Actresswas hardly an exceptional opportunity. [104] Davis associates acting in the film with betraying herself and her community. [105] Beyond numbers of nominations, available roles must be considered.

Almost 60 years after Hattie McDaniel, Halle Berry became the second Black women to win an Oscar for portraying a "conflation of the sexual siren and the welfare queen" in Monster's Ball (USA, 2001; dir. Marc Foster). [106] The win was symbolic—for Berry and the Academy, but new opportunities did not open for Black women, as the awards continued.[107] Berry's roles in Batman and X-Men films were unbound of racist stereotypes but disconnected from Black experiences. Like "positive images," superheroes don't deconstruct Hollywood prejudice.[108] After becoming first Latina/Latinx woman to win an Oscar for West Side Story (USA, 1961; dir. Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise), Rita Moreno abandoned Hollywood.[109] Anna May Wong and Sabu had done the same back in the 1930s and 1950s. Indeed, Thorpe calculates 13 of 20 nominations for Black men in leading roles "involve being arrested or incarcerated"—and 15 "involve violent or criminal behavior." [110] Ten have "a white buddy or counterpart," seven "feature no major black female characters," and "seven of the characters abuse or mistreat women." [111] The Academy nominates Black actors who, in words of Miriam Petty, play characters "bound to the destinies of the white people." [112] Morgan Freeman and Berry won for characters that perform a narrative function of giving White characters opportunities to overcome their individual racism. Structural racism is ignored. The awards define merit in individualist terms, not social ones.

As bell hooks argues, we don't need diverse representations, but transgressive possibilities.[113] Film educators introduce transgressive possibilities by incorporating ways to deconstruct industry myths. Tracey Moffatt and Gary Hillberg's compilation film Lip (USA, 1999) unsettles Hollywood's asymmetrical power allocations to Black and White women. They cut against chronology, avoiding Hollywood fantasies of incremental liberation. Footage underscores how White women increasingly have become false allies to Black women. A clip from For Pete's Sake (USA, 1974; dir. Peter Yates) show Barbara Streisand's character opens the door to Vivian Bonnell but blocks her entrance. Opportunity's door is open, but the way-in is blocked. Black actors are also locked into stereotypes. Bonnell plays Streisand's "sassy" maid, echoing McDaniel's Mammy. Moffatt and Hillberg reject the merit of Hollywood's technically perfect images. The deconstruct with "poor images," which Hito Steyerl argues reject industry propaganda that image resolution is the marker of quality. [114] Moffatt and Hillberg demonstrate opportunities for deconstructing Hollywood myths via feminist media practices.







Susan Kohner as Sarah Jane, performing "passing" in brownface with a "mess o'crawdads" on her head, in *Imitation of Life* (USA, 1959; dir. Douglas Sirk), resignified in *Lip* (USA, 1999; dir. Tracey Moffatt with Gary Hillberg).



Rosanne Katon as Esther Jeter, giving her singing voice to a white star under the movie magic of a white sound engineer in *Illusions* (USA, 1982; dir. Julie Dash).

Black filmmakers offer examples of transgressive possibilities. Among the first Black graduates from UCLA's film school who reinvented filmmaking, Julie Dash questions Hollywood's extraction of Black labor in *Illusions* (USA, 1982). Set during segregation, Lonette McKee plays Mignon Dupree, a lighter-skinned Black woman, passing as White to work in a Hollywood. Rosanne Katon plays Esther Jeter, hired to "lend" her voice to a star. Dubbing singing voices conceals Black labor required to create the illusion of White talent.[115] The White star is not required to lipsynch to Jeter's voice; instead, Jeter is required to pitch her singing to follow the White star's facial gestures. Dupree alone treats Jeter with dignity, offering food and drink after a long day's work inside the segregated studio, whose production is salvaged by Jeter's uncredited labor. Dupree labor in passing is self-alienating and must remain unremarked. When Jeter signal recognition, Dupree deflects it. She must endure self-alienation to open the racist system to other Black women.[116] Dupree challenges stereotypes of tragic mulattas.

A different Oscar, a better role model



Oscar Micheaux behind the camera.

Film educators might look to Oscar Micheaux over the Oscar awards for ideas of merit. Rather than working for change *inside* an existing system, Micheaux invented a new one, opening his own publishing and distribution companies in the 1910s. Even as the White House celebrated *The Birth of a Nation* (USA, 1915; dir. D.W. Griffith), Micheaux rejected simplistic "positive images" to offer complex social and cultural analyses of Black experiences. *Body and Soul* (USA, 1925) starred Paul Robeson, later unjustly criminalized under McCarthyism, in two roles. Micheaux's films were not perfect. In fact, bell hooks notes his nuance with male characters did not extend to female characters.[119] Film education reproduces Academy definitions of merit as *technical* rather than *social* when Griffith's films are taught over Micheaux's.

The Oscars are structured around unfair advantages and unearned privileges. Educators can refuse to give them power. "We have to find new ways of external validation that do not predicate themselves on White supremacy," suggests Roxane Gay. [118] Jack Halberstam praises Stefano Harney and Fred Moten for conceiving refusal as a "first right," that is, a "game-changing kind of refusal in that it signals the refusal of the choices as offered." [119] Jada Pinkett Smith refused to gift her cultural capital to the 2016 Oscar ceremony, noting:

"Should people of color refrain from participating all together? People can only treat us in the way in which we allow." [120]

"Begging for acknowledgement, or even asking, diminishes dignity, and diminishes power, and we are a dignified people, and we are powerful, and let's not forget it." [121]

Spike Lee joined her in boycotting the ceremony. Pinkett Smith attended in 2022 to support her husband's nomination during a ceremony heavily promoted as a watershed moment with unprecedented numbers of Black faces in front of cameras and behind them. When Will Smith slapped host Chris Rock over a joke about Pinkett Smith's hair, the Academy attempted redeem itself from inflicting Black pain by inflicting Black punishment.[122]

Oscar has historically been more attuned to White pleasure than Black pain. Due to segregation, David O. Selznick "had to call in a special favor just to have Hattie McDaniel allowed into the building" where the ceremony was held and where she



Paul Robeson as Rev. Isaiah T. Jenkins in *Body* and Soul (USA, 1925; dir. Oscar Micheaux).



Paul Robeson as Rev. Jenkins' brother Sylvester in *Body and Soul* (USA, 1925; dir. Oscar Micheaux).

would become the first Black actor to win an Oscar. [123] She was made to feel uncomfortable, so that the Academy's White members could feel good about themselves for rewarding her portrayal of a racist stereotype. It continues. Haile Gerima was given an inaugural Vantage Award by the Academy in 2021, yet Yohana Desta notes that he was being "fêted" by an industry that he actively opposed his entire career—alongside Sophia Loren from the very country that colonized Ethiopia. [124] He endured ignorance of history—or indifference to his pain—as a favor to Ava DuVernay.

Ryan Coogler made news by refusing an invitation to join the Academy:

"I love movies. ... For me, that's good enough. If I'm going to be a part of organizations, they're going to be labor unions, where we're figuring out how to take care of each other's families and health insurance. But I know that these things bring exposure." [125]

Coogler exposes the price for "exposure." Hollywood's gig economy renders life and livelihood precarious for most people working in the industry. Coogler's refusal to give away his cultural capital is all the more remarkable because he did it in 2021 as the Academy celebrated itself for avoiding another year of #OscarsSoWhite. It nominated its first Muslim (Riz Ahmed) and first Asian American (Steven Yeun) actors, plus two women directors (Emerald Fennell and Chloé Zhao). The Oscars' outlier year, notes *Variety*, reveals

"the fact that it took until 2021 for the Academy Awards to recognize a widely heterogeneous array of nominees also speaks directly to the deeply entrenched prejudices that have kept people of color outside of the Oscars—and the film industry at large—for so long." [126]

It might be better to ignore the Oscars all together.

De-Oscar-izing film education



Oyafunmike Ogunlano as Mona in Sankofa (Ethiopia, 1993; dir. Haile Gerima).

Adam White rhetorically asks what purpose the Oscars serve.[127] They matter because critics, distributors, educators, exhibitors, makers, and students often look to the Oscars as shorthand for worthy of merit.[128] Women constitute more than 50% of the planet's population—and not-White and not-Western people constitute most of it, yet their perspectives seldom appear in films awarded Oscars. The Academy might increase not-White and not-Western members, but the criteria of judgement are designed to exclude them.[129] Students often arrive in classes with their entire perception of filmmaking defined by Hollywood and its Oscars.[130] Understanding what the Oscars actually represents and whose interests they actually support is a compelling reason to reject them.

Decolonizing curricula and pedagogy are merely a beginning to actual reparations and abolitions that must take place to address various inequities. When film education emphasizes technical achievement, star system, and popular genres, while ignoring labor conditions and trade agreements, is allows Hollywood to set the terms. The Academy's *technical and artistic* cOncept of merit bulldozes *all else* (i.e., how the film intersects with the real world). *Gone with the Wind* and *Lawrence of Arabia* (UK/USA, 1962; dir. David Lean), both Oscar winners for Best Picture, alongside *The Jazz Singer* (USA, 1927; dir. Alan Crosland) and *The Searchers* (USA, 1956; dir. John Ford), have technical merit that is historical, but little social merit that is relevant. Oscar-winners and serial nominees Wes Anderson, Danny Boyle, James Cameron, Francis Ford Coppola, Sophia Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg also warrant reconsideration since they fail to challenge the system that guarantees their power. Film education needs de-Oscarizing to prevent future generations like them.

Film education is a starting point for decolonizing film criticism, distribution, and exhibition. By deconstructing the Oscars, educators can deconstruct film education. Much like the Academy segregates and partitions technical and artistic merit from political and social consequences, film education traditionally segregates "production and craft" (i.e., technical and practical training) from "history, theory, and criticism" (i.e., intellectual, contextual, and political training), thereby promoting a particular kind of filmmaking as the only and best one. Film practice and studies can be integrated, so that technical or artistic choices are understood as having political or social consequences.

Integrating studies and practice allows for opportunities to deconstruct industry-driven assumptions about story, character, style, aesthetics, technical skill, production values, and work flow that can make it difficult for not-White and not-Western students to tell their stories from their perspective. Too many classes remain colonizing with untheorized assumptions about "relatability," "personal vision," and "proper technique." Students can be misled with naïve statements that art and criticism are incompatible—that "over-thinking" (euphemism for thinking critically) kills creativity, as though thinking were somehow not creative —and creating was somehow outside thinking. Comparably, film educators can reject business solutions to make curricula more diverse and inclusive. Instead, they can focus on what bell hooks describes as an "oppositional gaze," which can be trained to recognize other definitions of merit, such as advocating for rights, changing toxic discourses, or locating new role-models

Why #OscarMustFall matters to everyone



Bill Nunn as Radio Raheem in Do the Right Thing (USA, 1989; dir. Spike Lee).

If Rhodes must fall, Oscar must fall—and it is our shared responsibility to help it fall. Given the crises that current and future generations will face, critics and teachers can recognize and publicize merit in activist, community, Indigenous, and other noncommercial filmmaking modes. Assimilating to Oscar's model is an exercise in "disempowerment," to borrow Felicia Rose Chavez's term. [131] Film critics, distributors, educators, exhibitors, and makers can contribute in different ways.

Educators might reflect upon their role in perpetuating disempowerment. If students think that an Oscar nomination proves that films or filmmakers from their home culture or country are finally "good enough," educators can help them see that the Academy is actually *not good enough* to evaluate such films and filmmakers. Educators can deconstruct such disempowering assumptions as part of the curriculum, requiring White-Western students "to acquire the intellectual and cultural resources to function effectively in a plural society."[132]

Critics can minimize industry awards and box-office figures, which contribute to a cycle of disempowerment, and instead we can champion other models. Juan Francisco Salazar and Amalia Córdova describe how Indigenous media festivals decouple the term "best" from individual achievement and apply it to social engagement. [133] Were mainstream media to focus attention on socially engaged film, it might embolden distributors and exhibitioners to select more of this kind of work. Makers can stop defining themselves by festivals and awards. Instead, they can define themselves by the content of their films—and the debates into which their films intervene.

Hollywood already saturates media with press releases and promotional materials, so there is no need for any of us to disseminate manufactured buzz. Instead, we can focus on evaluating films, not as escapist entertainment, but as *engaged responses* that aim to shift larger public discourses on social issues of climate crisis, neoliberal economics, populist nationalisms, private wars, public health, religious fundamentalism, single-issue feminism, and systemic racism. We need to become advocates and allies for future generations, whose world will be more precarious than our own. #OscarMustFall is not to say that Oscar should be destroyed but decentered; in other words, it should not stand as a universal or global marker of merit. It should stand for what it really is, that is, a White-Western-serving institution, whose very purpose is extending its power as a brand. Films education needs to deconstruct Oscar's myth of merit. Oscar is not going to change, but we can stop giving it the power that it will *always* abuse.

Postscript

Refusing the Oscars involves risk. The Academy recent apology to Sacheen Littlefeather for how she was treated at the 1973 Oscar ceremony when she read a

statement on behalf of Marlon Brando, who boycotted the ceremony, to refuse an acting award due to racist treatment of "American Indians" by Hollywood and the United States. [134] As the current Academy president admits, she was "professionally boycotted, personally harassed and attacked." [135] The letter characterizes the intimidation and retribution as "abuse." [136]. Hollywood did not treat Brando as it treated as Littlefeather.

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JUMP CUT A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word: keywords

by Julia Lesage

Rarely do I hear about a book, quickly buy and read it, and find it explains many things I'd researched and been thinking about for years. This happened recently when I heard an NPR story on Francesca Bolla Tripodi's new book, *The* Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy. Tripodi is a feminist ethnographer who is also an expert on algorithms and search engines. She writes for popular outlets as well as scholarly works, and has even given Congressional testimony on search engines. After reading her book and tracking down some interviews with her, I felt like I was hearing the other shoe fall. That is, in 1998 Linda Kintz and I published an anthology, Media, Culture and the Religious Right, which meant we were doing our research on these topics in '96 and '97. On reading Tripodi's book, I more fully understood the trajectory of what I had then called, following Pierre Bourdieu, the conservative habitus or conservatives' widely shared choices in politics, culture and lifestyle. Furthermore, The Propagandists' Playbook introduced me to a new concept—that many conservatives practice their own kind of media literacy, applying ways of studying a text long a part of Protestant Bible study, to do frequent Internet searches on political issues. Tripodi's book traces the mechanisms and consequences of that practice. (I will describe more about that in a bit).

Tripodi has chosen to make her book highly readable, indicating in general how the keywords we use in Internet searches ordinarily function with platforms like Google vs. how these search engines can be "optimized" or manipulated. Looking at the larger context as well as the lived experience of conservative habitus, which she observed close up as an ethnographer, Tripodi does not just analyze the media or computer algorithms but posits what she calls the conservative information ecology: interlocking institutions, platforms, and actors that have a stake in creating a closed circle within which information and affect are shaped, circulated, sought out, and received. One of the limits of search engines is their reliance on keywords, the phrasing we use in a search—e.g., consider the different results from searching "undocumented workers" or "illegal aliens." In addition, the Right manufactures villains and misdeeds in politics, articulating succinct phrases to characterize them, knowing conservatives will search on these, and there will be plenty of podcasts, articles, blogs, YouTube videos, etc., "seeded" for users to find in their searches. Her discussion of the Right's invention of villains, in fact, reminded me of something I'd begun to follow in the 90's, when Hilary Clinton was already being fashioned as a "witch." For years this unrelenting attack on her in Right blogs and news reports continued in much the same way, culminating in the emotional but empty call, "Lock her up."

In fact, the Right has been more effective at propaganda than the Left, especially in honing the most advantageous key words. It is no accident. In an essay I wrote for *Media, Culture and the Christian Right* about Christian Coalition organizing tapes, I noted how even small local chapters for political action were taught to articulate apt phrases. In a tape on press relations and communications, Rebecca Hagelin, then media director for key conservative organizations, discussed how local Coalition chapters should prepare for speech making, even to make spontaneous comments. Research was key, she said, but also the groups had to rehearse collectively to decide how to phrase all their important issues in a catchy and memorable way. As I wrote at the time,

"In terms of propaganda, this aptitude, cultivated so carefully through extensive preplanning, has proven to be the Christian Coalition's genius, turning a moral conviction into a well-turned phrase that seems to sum up rational social-policy agenda."

What has changed since then is not only the massive expansion and consolidation of the Internet, with search engines and social media amassing a large amount of personal data on everyone, but also the use of sophisticated tools available for manipulating search. Companies specializing in search engine optimization (known as SEO) serve both merchandizing and elections. And both in the '90s and now, the Right has consistently had a more coordinated, interconnected media strategy—funded through corporations, think tanks, and televangelists. It is far more adept at structuring coordinated messaging than is the Left. For example, in the 90s, in an age of fax-machine and mailing list activism and satellite television outreach, Paul Weyrich, one of the founders of the Heritage Foundation, maintained a 24-hour news and information studio in Washington DC for his network, National Empowerment Television, which then delivered a daily summary of the previous days' news and talking points to Congressional staffers. Also, in the same period, Pat Robertson used his vast mailing list from the 700 Club and its outreach to join with Ralph Reed to initiate the Christian Coalition to train grass-roots Republican activists in chapters across the country. Concurrently, the Left, with its idealization of a counterculture, eschewed topdown mainstream institutions and authority, was always underfunded, and perhaps was inspired by an implicit sense of utopian socialism. I make this contrast because the Left, with all of its idealism, is where I have long resided. It is just now that I can trace how the seeds of this conservative information ecology, then planted, are now blossoming.

Perhaps the most important new knowledge I gained from reading *The* Propagandists' Playbook was an understanding of conservative users' search and reading strategies and their use of the Internet. As an ethnographer, Tripodi immersed herself in Right media and activism. She discovered that her informants were avid searchers for political information, their version of fact checking, using mostly Google. Tripodi explains this kind of information-seeking by her informants and then demonstrates its presence in Right media. She traces this conservative model of reading and information gathering back to the history of Protestantism, which placed an emphasis on individual Bible reading. That is, a major social change in the Reformation was the assumption that everyone could draw their own lessons from the Bible by directly reading it and applying it to their lives, socially leading to greater individualism and egalitarianism. This is a different media literacy from what I and most of my peers teach. The textual analysis (of both literature and film) that I learned and still use pays attention to literary and media conventions and intellectual/artistic milieux, what Bourdieu would call "the field of cultural production." In contrast, the conservative model of "scriptural" reading looks for information to see "what's there" or "how it applies to me" with context stripped out. It beggars analysis, honing in narrowly on the text and individual interpretation. That is why strict Constitutionalism has such

support. The Internet is full of conservative users seeking out a kind of truth, but as Tripodi describes them in an article in *Wired*,

"they are actually participating in a scavenger hunt engineered by those spreading the lies."

Lest all this seem terribly pessimistic, it does suggest a new strategy for teaching, which is to re-examine and articulate keywords. In a wonderful early text of Second Wave Feminism, Mary Daly in Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (1973) points out that naming and classifying are attributes of power. Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault said much the same thing. What we define verbally, and how, is related to what we do or don't see or understand. Capitalist and political marketing, so interrelated, rely on this principle, as well as on the emotional valence of words and images. Creating keywords and listening to how others use them endow the user with a kind of confidence and power. There are lots of things to teach about keywords. Doing computer searches with framing the search in very different ways; making up key words for a fictional product; thinking about what's catchy and quotable; finding things on the Internet opposite from what you believe and analyzing the language. I think it is also useful to analyze theories of discourse and discourse communities, as well as the legislative force of discourse-what must or must not be expressed. Keywords are a path into discussing political disagreements and lead immediately into understanding the political, personal, and economic valences of modern communicative strategies.

In an environment rife with censorship, such a return to teaching rhetoric seems a delightful prospect. Some of you are already teaching some form of media literacy. I would love to see more articles in *Jump Cut* on this kind of teaching and its results.

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